

BOOKS BY  
**DENISE BOSSARTE**

GRACE BISHOP NOVELS

*Glamorous*

STORIES OF GRACE BISHOP'S PARANORM WORLD

*Return (Danny's story)*

*Beginnings (Grace's story)*



GLAMOROUS

A Grace Bishop Novel

by Denise Bossarte

Text Copyright © 2018 Denise Bossarte

All rights reserved.

January 2018 Edition

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the publisher.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser. Under no circumstances may any part of this book be photocopied for resale.

This is a work of fiction. Any similarity between the characters and situations within its pages and places or persons, living or dead, is unintentional and coincidental.

For my husband, Randy, who kept telling me “It’s good, just publish it!”  
and for DAve, miss ya buddy!



GLAMOROUS





## Chapter 1

DL grabbed the cell phone off the bedside table on the second vibration, dashing into the attached bathroom to avoid waking Jennifer. It was too late at night for his eyes to take the vanity lights. Instead he relied on the light from the phone. The glow caught the multiple colors of the tattoos on his arms as he held the phone up to his face and waited for his eyes to focus on the number.

Only one of his kids would call at this time of night. But when he recognized Chris's number, he almost didn't answer. It was rarely ever good when it came to Chris. Sighing, DL answered the phone. He ran his hand through his dark, shoulder-length hair and roughly scrubbed at his face, trying to get his brain functioning.

"Hey, Chris..."

Before DL finished his sentence, Chris's desperate voice interrupted him.

"DL! Shit, oh, shit!"

"Chris, slow down a minute. What's going on?"

"She's cut up—her face, her arms. Oh God, there's so much blood... What-do-I-do? What-do-I-do!"

"Who's hurt, Chris? Is it Beth? Did something happen to Beth?"  
What if something awful had happened to Beth?

"Wha...? Yeah, it's Beth. She's hurt bad—she's bleeding real bad. I don't know what to do!"

"Where are you? Are you at the apartment? Is she somewhere safe?"

"Yeah, yeah, my place... We're at my place. But what do I do? I

can't get the bleeding to stop!"

Knowing Chris, he wouldn't call an ambulance. DL needed to go over there himself to try to help Beth. And get Chris calmed down enough to let emergency response professionals come and do their jobs.

"Chris, listen to me. You need to get some towels—bath towels, kitchen towels, it doesn't matter. Get all you have, and use them to put pressure on Beth's wounds. The pressure will help to stop the bleeding."

DL suspected Chris had dealt with injuries before. He should know how to take care of Beth on his own. Something had spooked him enough that he was freaking out and not thinking straight. Whatever had happened, there was a strong chance Chris was also high, which would explain the way he was acting.

"Towels? Yeah, yeah. We got some in the bathroom."

"Then go do what I said. Put them on the wounds and apply pressure. I'm coming right now to help. I'm going to hang up. You go take care of Beth, and I'll be right there."

"Yeah, yeah... sure..." The line went dead.

"Who was on the phone?" Jennifer asked in a sleepy voice from the bed as DL slipped back into the room. Her bright auburn hair tumbled across her freckled face as she shifted toward him. "One of the center kids?"

"Yes." DL kept his voice soft while working to pull on his jeans and socks before sitting on the bed next to Jennifer.

"Chris and Beth ran into some trouble, and I'm going over to see what I can do to help. I'll be back as soon as I can."

DL hated to minimize the situation, but he wanted to avoid waking Jennifer fully, or she would insist on coming with him. But better to have her safe in bed than rushing into God-knew-what at Chris's.

He leaned in and moved the downy wisps of her hair to expose a soft cheek and gently kissed her goodbye. Then he jumped up to snatch a shirt from the hamper, satisfied to hear her rolling over and settling back to sleep.

A quick trip through the kitchen to grab his keys, and he was out the door.

He ran to his truck. “Please start. Please start...” He sighed with relief when it growled to life. It looked like a piece of crap, and only ran half the time, but at least there was less of a chance it would be stolen when he got to Chris’s place.

He called 911 when he was half-way to the apartment. It was a risk to wait that long, but he was afraid if the ambulance got there too soon, Chris might do something irrational. This way, he’d have time to deal with Chris and help Beth before they arrived. It would increase the chance of Beth getting to the hospital with no one else getting hurt tonight, especially the paramedics coming to help.

After racing to the address, he took the stairs two at a time to the third floor. He was forced to hurdle the garbage littering the steps and climb over a few people passed out in the hallway to get to Chris’s apartment. He tried opening the door, but it was locked. He pounded on it instead.

“Chris,” he yelled. “It’s me, DL. Open the door!”

There was no answer. He pounded harder and longer. Turning his frustration and anger on the door, he bounced his fist off the thin imitation wood that was ready to dent under his assault.

“Chris,” he shouted again. “Come here and open the damn door!”

DL paused to listen and was relieved to hear footsteps moving toward him from deeper inside the apartment.

“Who’s there?” Chris asked through the closed door.

“It’s me, DL. You called me, remember?”

“DL? Shit, oh, shit!” Chris fumbled with the dead bolt and opened the door as wide as the security chain would allow.

DL was about to push through the door—screw the chain—when he saw a flash of light. Chris was holding a gun beside his right leg, and the gun was shaking. But right now, it was pointed down at the ground and not at DL.

“Who else is there?” Chris asked, his eyes wide and bloodshot, his pupils large.

DL slowly raised his hands and motioned for Chris to stay calm.

“It’s only me, Chris. Nobody else,” DL said.

His guess had been right. Chris was high. DL had to make sure not to do anything to give Chris an excuse to act stupid.

Chris looked back and forth through the crack in the doorway. Then, he clumsily undid the chain. He opened the door enough to let DL in, closing it so fast that he almost caught him with the edge.

“Where’s Beth?” DL looked around the disheveled apartment, taking in the piles of fast food containers and drug paraphernalia littering the room. The place smelled like a combination of moldy carpet and sour garbage.

“In the bathroom.” Chris headed that way after re-bolting the door. The entire front of his shirt and the thighs of his jeans were slick with blood, and it covered the length of his arms.

*Dammit!* DL clenched his hands into fists as he followed Chris to the bathroom. He had convinced himself on the drive over that Chris had exaggerated about all the blood. But it was obvious something had gone wrong tonight.

DL steeled himself as he came to the doorway of the bathroom. Chris hovered at the edge of the door, and DL had to push past him to get inside the cramped and dirty room.

DL’s stomach clenched at the sight of Beth’s tiny limp form splayed out on the cracked linoleum. Mismatched towels of various sizes and colors layered her face and arms. Blood was spreading out into a large pool by her head, tinting her pale blond hair red. Her legs appeared untouched and un-bloodied, but so many towels covered the rest of her, DL couldn’t tell how badly she was hurt.

“Is she dead?” Chris ran a hand through his hair, creating bloody spikes in it.

DL looked at him before turning back to Beth. “Haven’t you been applying pressure to her wounds to stop the bleeding?”

He knelt beside Beth’s body and reached for her neck to feel for a pulse.

“I got the towels, just like you said.” Chris jerked the gun toward Beth. “But the bleeding didn’t stop.”

DL shook his head at Chris’s half-assed attempts at following his instructions and focused his attention on Beth. At his touch, Beth moaned, and a rush of relief filled his body.

“It’s okay, Beth. It’s DL, kiddo. I’m here to help.”

He breathed through his mouth, trying to keep his breath steady even as the metallic smell of blood rose to meet him. He could almost taste the blood, it was so thick in the room. But breathing through his mouth lessened the threat of nausea. To his disgust, his knee slipped a bit in the blood near her head, and his pants immediately became soaked in red.

DL checked the towels Chris had placed on Beth’s cuts. The ones on her arms were already starting to stick to the drying blood, and she whimpered when he tried to lift the towels there. He left them alone and moved on to check her face and shoulders. She might have wounds anywhere on her arms and back, and he didn’t want to miss major injuries. He worked to be as gentle as possible with her, but she continued to whimper at his touch.

Luckily, there were no cuts on her shoulders, but the gashes on her face were deep and bleeding heavily. He made sure there was enough space for her to breathe, and then applied firm but steady pressure to the towels covering her head. They were soaked with her blood immediately, becoming saturated until the redness formed a thin glove over his hands as the blood penetrated the material. He fought a wave of nausea at the thought of the damage to her small, delicate face.

“What are you doing?” Chris stepped through the door-frame and

loomed over DL's shoulder.

"I'm trying to keep her from bleeding to death." DL attempted to keep the frustration out of his voice, aware of the gun in Chris's hand hovering near the back of his head.

"Man, this is so fucked up! So fucked up!" Chris left the cramped room and started pacing outside the door.

"Chris," DL said as calmly as he could while compressing the towels. "I need you to focus, here. Tell me what happened to Beth. Who did this to her?"

"It was some dude, some whacked out dude! Beth was out trickin'. I needed her help making a few deliveries, so I went to pick her up." Chris looked pointedly at him when he said "deliveries," daring DL to call him on it.

"She ignored me when I yelled at her to get her ass in the car, and I went to get her. I was right next to her, and she kept ignoring me, the dumb bitch. I grabbed her arm and was about to smack some sense into her stupid head. Then this guy came out of nowhere and just attacked her with a knife.

"I pulled my gun on him and tried shooting him, but it wouldn't fire. That's never happened before. I was right next to the guy but couldn't nail the mother fucker.

"And the whole time Beth is screaming, and he keeps cutting her. Finally, I went to club him with the gun, and he jumped into a car and took off.

"Beth was a mess, so I got her to my car and drove back here as fast as I could. I didn't know what to do, so I called you."

The sound of approaching sirens grew louder as Chris finished his story. Slow realization dawned on his face, and his head whipped back and forth between the source of the sound and DL, crouched over Beth.

"You called the cops?" Chris yelled, turning to aim the gun at DL's face. "Shit, I said no cops!"

DL looked at Chris over his shoulder and stared at the shaky end of the gun barrel. His heart raced as he met Chris's angry eyes. DL allowed himself a second to gain his composure before speaking in a neutral but unsteady voice.

“An ambulance, Chris. An ambulance for Beth.” He nodded to the prone figure on the floor to make his point—this was for the injured girl.

DL watched the battle warring in Chris's eyes as they flicked between DL and Beth, anger then fear flashing over his face. DL steeled himself as Chris's face settled into anger. He forced himself to keep his gaze steady on Chris, even as he prepared for him to pull the trigger. He was aware his death was coming eventually, but he hadn't envisioned it happening in a dirty bathroom, blood-soaked, while trying to save a girl from dying.

Chris took one more look at Beth, sprawled under DL's blood coated hands, and took off into the other room.

DL released the breath he was holding shakily but maintaining enough presence of mind to continue applying pressure to the towels on Beth's face. He could make out Chris ransacking the apartment, rushing from room to room, presumably gathering up his stash. Then the front door slammed against the wall as Chris bolted through it and stumbled down the steps.

Not long after Chris made his escape, DL heard the ambulance pull up outside the apartment building. Right afterward, a voice was calling out from the bottom of the stairs.

“Who called the ambulance? Who needs help?”

“Up here on the third floor. The door's open!” DL shouted. He continued to call out until the paramedics made it to the apartment and found him in the bathroom where he huddled over Beth.

They quickly took over, shifting DL away and assessing Beth's condition. He answered their questions about what he knew of her situation,

working to match their calm and professional manner. After a brief interchange with DL, they focused on bandaging Beth's wounds and starting an IV.

It seemed to take forever for them to finish up what they needed to do to get Beth stable, while DL watched helplessly from the side lines. Finally, they lifted her to the gurney and maneuvered it out of the apartment and down the stairs to the waiting ambulance.

DL ran to his own truck, heedless of the blood on his clothes and hands and how it might look to anyone who saw him. He jumped in and started the truck as fast as he could to follow the ambulance to the hospital. He took a moment to wipe one hand on a dry place on his shirt, then pulled out his cell phone to dial Grace's number.



## Chapter 2

Robyn sat in his darkened apartment. He tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible while Gustav paced the room. The single light from the adjacent kitchen threw Gustav's movement onto the wall as large dancing shadows.

"What happened tonight?" Gustav demanded. "What went wrong?"

Robyn shrunk further down into the chair, but there wasn't any way he was going to escape Gustav's anger.

"I don't know." Robyn's voice trembled. "I did everything I normally do. I drove to one of the places you recommended. And it started just like all the other times. I got a great spot to watch the girls, and I found one just like you hoped—one with emerald green eyes. I even had her right up to the car. It was so easy."

"So easy?" Gustav moved to tower over Robyn, his nostrils flaring. "Then why didn't you bring the girl to me? That is our bargain, little Robyn."

Robyn squirmed under Gustav's livid stare. "There was a boy," he said, his voice barely audible.

"A boy," Gustav snarled as he placed his hands on the arms of the chair and leaned in to hover inches from Robyn's face.

"Y-y-y-es." Robyn's whole body trembled as the closeness revealed Gustav's protruding eyes and mottled skin.

"So you panicked," Gustav said, his voice a deep growl.

Robyn nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"And then you ran." Gustav's hands tightened on the chair's arms, causing the wood to creak under the pressure.

Robyn willed himself to be still, blinking rapidly as sweat ran into his eyes. Gustav needed him, needed him to find and bring him the girls. He just needed to offer Gustav something that would calm him down.

“I can go out again tomorrow. Try to find another girl.”

“Imbecile!” Gustav threw his hands up and turned to pace the room.

“This was the last night of the cycle. We won’t be able to look for another girl until the next cycle begins.”

“I’ll do it next time, I promise,” Robyn said, his words rushing out.

“I won’t let anyone get in the way.”

Gustav stopped his pacing so that his back was to the light of the kitchen. His shadow fell across Robyn, his body motionless except for his fists, which clenched and unclenched as his ragged breath slowly calmed.

Robyn sensed he was out of danger for tonight. But just in case, he repeated himself. “I promise. Next time I’ll get the girl.”

## Chapter 3

Together, Grace and Danny entered Sally's Home-style Diner, but they split apart once inside the door. She moved to the counter while Danny headed to their usual booth at the back of the restaurant. Grace stood at the counter until she caught Sally's eye as she finished up taking an order from another regular. The diner was one of the most popular places in Dayan Springs, for both tourist and locals, and Sally always worked the counters on Saturdays.

While she was waiting on Sally, Grace removed the scrunchy holding her dark hair in a ponytail. The thick hair settled across her shoulders, and she ran her fingers through it to dry out the remaining dampness. She had pulled it up on the way out the door, expecting the hot morning air to dry it most of the way as they walked to the diner.

After a bit of delay, Sally made her way over to take Grace's order. Her gray hair was coming loose from the pins meant to keep it out of her face. Despite her rush, Sally had a broad smile for Grace, the lines creasing her face into well-worn patterns. She took the order by memory and waved Grace on to her seat.

As Sally turned to call out the order to the cook, Grace checked her watch. She had a good half hour until her meeting with DL. They had made good time walking from the townhouse, and she had plenty of time before he arrived to enjoy satisfying the hunger her morning run had raised. It would give her time to organize her thoughts for the upcoming conversation. She didn't like to feel rushed before a meeting.

Grace walked over to join Danny, who had already slid into the booth marked "Reserved" on a handwritten index card stuck in a tiny metal stand. Danny's tousled, dark brown hair appeared as if he had recently gotten out of bed. His thin 11-year-old body was bouncing in place with barely

contained energy. His blue eyes sparkled up at her as he waited for her to take a seat.

The aged vinyl creaked as Grace settled in on the right side of the booth. She was careful to avoid the crack taking up half of the seat, not wanting her legs to get pinched.

Grace laid out the *New York Times* crossword puzzle face up on the table in front of Danny, who was squirming in his seat, waiting to tackle it. She watched him work the puzzle without a pencil. He did it all in his head, sounding out the answers under his breath while tracing the squares with a thin finger.

Once Sally delivered the food, it didn't take long for Grace to clean her plate. She finished by mopping up the loose egg yolks with the last piece of toast. She leaned against the back of the booth and felt the coolness of the cracked vinyl chill the sweat beaded between her shoulder blades. The city had been particularly hot and muggy this summer, and the dim chilliness of the diner was a welcome relief.

Grace glanced down at the watch on her tanned wrist. It wasn't like DL to run late, especially when he said it was important they meet. A few seconds later, he entered the diner and stood in the doorway while peering around. She raised her hand and waved until she got his attention. He maneuvered his way past the other customers to slide in opposite her.

*"DL isn't looking too good."* Grace heard Danny's voice in her mind as he glanced up from his work on the crossword.

*"Yeah, he looks like he had a rough night."*

*"I mean his aura, Gracie. He's normally all greens and yellows. But he's all dirty gray, today."*

Grace wasn't sure what to make of Danny's observations. She didn't respond to him but studied DL's tired face.

She had been friends with DL for the last three years since her parents died. He ran a non-profit center that gave kids a safe place to go after

school and provided a place for street kids to get help when they needed it. He was completely dedicated to these kids. She wasn't surprised to have gotten a call from him late at night when it involved one of the kids.

DL leaned back against the seat with a sigh, the dark bags under his eyes emphasizing his drawn appearance. He laid his hands on the table, the bright colors of his tattooed arms in sharp contrast to the gray Formica top.

Grace gulped the last of her drink and pushed the plate and glass aside. She would get something for DL to eat once Sally returned to pick up her used dishes. He looked like he could use it. For now, she gave him her full attention. He wouldn't beat around the bush about what happened last night with Beth and the emergency run to the hospital.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "The police wanted to talk to me some more this morning when I went to check on Beth."

"How's she doing?" Grace asked.

"Better." DL's voice was heavy with tiredness. "She's stabilized, and the doctors are considering plastic surgery for her face to help repair the damage. The rest of her wounds will heal with the stitches they put in last night. But her face will need work to get her back to looking like a normal girl again. I'm praying she'll come out of this mess with as little disfigurement as possible."

"And how are *you* doing?" Grace asked.

"I'm fine, I'm fine." He waved away her concern. "Like I said on the phone, I'm not only worried about Beth. I'm worried about all my kids."

As DL made the statement, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a piece of notepaper folded into a tight square. With care, he unfolded it and placed it on the table to smooth it out with both hands, then he rotated it around so the writing was readable from her position. On it was a list of first names, all female, covering almost the entire length of the page.

"These are the names of all the girls that have gone missing in the last two years. I suspect something is happening to my kids, but I haven't

been able to come up with anything solid. I believe the attack on Beth was another instance of this, but she was lucky and somehow got away when the others didn't."

Grace read through the list of names, each one with a date inked in beside it. "What makes you think these girls didn't move on to another place or go back home?" She studied DL's face.

"Grace, you know these kids. None of them will go back to the messed up lives they came from. They might not advertise leaving the city, but I've asked around. I only put names on the list if I was sure it was unusual for them to disappear."

"Okay. What about their friends? What do they say?"

"For everyone on the list, I've spoken to at least one person who can confirm the girls didn't plan to leave. They simply stopped showing up at their usual hangouts," he said.

"What's going on, then?"

"I can't tell you for sure." He rubbed his face and eyes with his hands.

"There's a ton of stuff out there these kids can run into—gangs, drugs, prostitution. They're expendable on the streets, and most of the 'bad guys' don't bother cleaning up after themselves if the kids get in their way. If anything happened to one of them, there's at least one person who's heard something about it. That or a dead body. But not for these girls." He tapped the list of names with his index finger.

"They just disappeared, without a trace—gone."

Grace studied the names and dates again. The dates covered about two and a half years and did not show an obvious pattern. There were significant gaps, as well.

*"Danny, take a quick peek at the dates on this list for me. Does your pattern-happy brain see anything in these?"*

Danny turned from working the crossword and leaned over to study

the list of names and dates. He frowned in concentration as he puzzled over the list, and Grace swore she could hear the cogs in his head turning.

*“I’m sorry, Gracie. I’ve tried applying all the algorithms I can to this, but I’m coming up with diddly-squat. I don’t think there’ll be a simple explanation for what’s happening to DL’s kids just from this list.”*

“Thanks for trying,” she consoled him as he turned back to the crossword puzzle. He appeared engrossed in the effort of completing it, but he was now paying close attention to what she and DL were saying.

Grace studied DL again, asking the question she already knew the answer to, but had to ask. “Did you go to the police about this?”

Luckily, DL couldn’t hear her side chatter with Danny and continued on with the audible part of the conversation.

DL gave her a worn smile. “I tried, Grace. Multiple times. The cops don’t investigate something like this very hard. Homeless girls ‘disappearing,’ but no one has information about it? They write it off, like you suggested, as the kids moving on or going back home. Even if they had the manpower to do a real investigation instead of a cursory probe, which of my kids would talk to them? Who would risk getting locked up for vagrancy or shipped back home?”

He shook his head. “No, the cops haven’t done much of anything on this.”

“Even with Beth’s incident? The cops must be trying to figure out who attacked her?”

DL snorted. “They think Chris did it. They’re asking questions about Chris and Beth’s relationship and how they can find him.”

“And you don’t think he did?”

“Chris may live a rough life, but this isn’t him. And I saw and talked to him afterward. Something strange happened last night, but it wasn’t Chris who hurt Beth.”

Grace gave DL a silent look, waiting for him to continue.

“All of these girls are connected. I have this powerful feeling something bad is happening to them, and Beth was the lucky one to escape... thanks to Chris. The police won't believe me. The only one I could think of who would help us was you. You understand as well as I do, everyone deserves justice, regardless of who they are. You're a solid private investigator, and you also have the connections with the police to get information I can't.”

“Would your kids talk to me?” she asked.

“Well, being a PI isn't the same as being a cop, but you're still 'establishment' in their eyes. The best I can do is get some of them to talk to me. You have a great track record of finding people. I hope what I can get from them will be enough for you to solve this thing.”

“What else can you tell me about the girls on the list?” she asked.

“The best I can tell is a few were doing drugs, but that doesn't seem to be the connection between them. It appears all of them were tricking at one point or another. It's the one possibility I can come up with for us to check out.”

“Okay, we'll put aside anything drug related for now,” Grace agreed. “Sounds like that shouldn't be a primary line of investigation. I think you've landed on the best thing we have going for us, right now. The common denominator might be tricking.”

DL's face became grim. “It's not much to go on, Grace. Where do we go from here?”

“It's time for me to reach out to Officer Winiarksi.”

“He's your cop friend?” DL asked.

“Yes. Friend first, cop second. But an upstanding guy who would want to help once I've told him about what you've shown me.”

DL pursed his lips, his face growing tight.

At his expression, Grace jumped in. “I understand you didn't get very far before when you tried working with the police. But Billy is my



friend, and we can get further if we get him interested. Can you stop by my place on Tuesday night, around eight? I can get Billy to come over, and we can discuss what you have on the missing girls. We can all work together to figure out the next steps.”

DL sat, considering it for a moment, wetting his lips before speaking. “What good will it do to have me there, Grace? You have the list of names and dates, already. If he wants to help, that should be enough to get him started.”

Grace forced herself to let DL finish. She had to remember he had been battling against police apathy for a long time. This recent attack on Beth and the police’s reaction had pushed him to come looking for her help.

“I think you should be there to walk Billy through it yourself. You know these girls. If he has any questions, you could answer them then and there. And in the meantime, you can find out the last place the girls were seen tricking. That might be important information to have.”

DL shifted in his seat, his eyes coming to rest on the list of names sitting on the table. Finally, he raised his gaze to meet Grace’s eyes. “I can be there. I’m not sure it’ll make any difference to go another round with the police, but I have to do what I can to stop more of my girls from getting hurt.”

“I know Billy. If I ask, he’ll be willing to at least listen to what you have to say. And give you some advice on next steps. Plus, I’m wondering whether it’s just your girls that are disappearing. Maybe professional prostitutes are going missing along with the homeless girls turning a few tricks. That might explain the gaps in dates on your list when none of your girls went missing,” she said with a grimace.

“You mean other women might be disappearing as well as my girls?” DL’s expression grew more concerned.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” Grace slid the list back to Eli. “We may have someone out there preying on women—prostitutes and homeless girls,

both.”

## Chapter 4

Grace turned into the cemetery entrance, the wrought iron, decorative gates pushed to the sides against the ivy-covered walls. There were no roses blooming on the trellises bracketing the gates. It was too late in the summer for that.

As usual, this part of the cemetery was empty of visitors. The cemetery was nestled in the older, quiet part of Dayan Springs, away from the main tourist areas. It was off the radar for tourists site-seeing at the big historic cemeteries and saw little traffic beyond the locals visiting their relatives.

She drove up the wandering one lane road to the top of the hill at the back of the cemetery. Along the way, she admired the well-kept lawn, spotted with headstones stretching away on both sides of the pavement.

As soon as she pulled the car over to the side of the lane, Danny jumped out and headed down the hill.

*“Say hello to Samantha and Joshua for me,”* Grace said as Danny ran off.

*“Sure will!”* His voice rang in her head as he headed back down the road.

Grace lifted the bunches of flowers from the back seat, careful not to bump them against anything as she exited the car. Clutching the large bouquet of daisies and a double bunch of tulips in her right hand, she walked up the gravel path leading to a lone Japanese maple on the hilltop, shading two matching headstones.

Reaching the graves, she removed the old flowers from each vase, replacing one with daisies and the other with the red tulips. The second bundle of electric blue tulips, she nestled within the roots of the sculpted tree, placing them alongside a small flat tombstone sunken part way into the

ground. With a nod of acknowledgment to the diffuse form hovering near the tree trunk, she circled around to the front of the matching headstones to sit cross legged between them, facing down the hill.

“Hi Mom,” she whispered, laying one open palm on the grave with the tulips. “Hi Dad.” She repeated the gesture on the grave with the daisies.

She bowed her head, taking a long breath. Even after three years, there was still an intense sense of loss each time she came for a visit. What if they hadn’t died when they did? Would Danny still be alive? Would Grace still be part of the police force? Would peaceful dreams rather than nightmares of her and Danny’s accident fill her nights?

*Enough!* She forced the usual litany out of her mind.

Acknowledging the ache she felt deep in her heart, she raised her head and relaxed her hands in her lap. She let her gaze wander across the landscape, noting a smattering of living people in the lower part of the cemetery.

Grace thought back to times her mother brought her to tend the Japanese maple her parents planted for their plots.

“Rest in peace means just that,” Francene would always say. “We selected our plots here because this little cemetery is never busy with people, even on the weekends. And this tree will grow to give shade for our graves and for visitors when they come. We’re planting it now so it will have years to grow before we need it.”

Grace appreciated the shade in summer and the beautiful leaves all year long. But she regretted the tree didn’t have a long time to grow before her parents were laid beneath it.

Grace smiled when she caught sight of Danny playing hoops with a small girl in a gingham dress and a boy dressed like a 1890s newsy. Samantha and Joshua were Danny’s playmates whenever they visited the cemetery. Both ghosts had been at the cemetery for so long, their names had faded from their grave markers. They were happy to find a new friend in

Danny. They were shy around Grace but were uninhibited in their games with him.

They ran laughing and shouting, chasing the hoop as it rolled and bumped over the rough ground and through several headstones. The cemetery was only a half mile at its widest point—she never worried about losing Danny there. It was good to see him playing with children who were his own “age.”

As her gaze continued to wander across the grounds, she spoke in the soft voice she used when greeting her parents.

“Danny is adjusting well, for a kid who’s haunting his sister,” she said. “We’ve finally settled into the new place. Nine months after our accident, and we’ve gotten the rest of the boxes unpacked at last. Now it’s starting to be a real home.”

As usual, when thinking about Danny and his current “life,” she couldn’t stop the wave of guilt rushing through her. Despite all those times the therapist worked with her on how the accident wasn’t her fault, she still had not gotten rid of the guilt. She couldn’t seem to let go of the idea she should have done something more to prevent the accident from happening.

She took a few deep breaths, struggling to release her line of thought. With an effort, she turned her attention back to updating her parents.

“I’m sorry you’ll miss his birthday this weekend. It’s hard to believe this will be the third one since you died. I feel a bit weird celebrating a birthday for someone who will never get older, but it’s what he wants.” She picked at the grass.

“He’s really excited I agreed to let Sophie know about him. She’s the neighbor I told you about who does the palm and tarot readings down at the strip mall on Lincoln. I’m not certain it’s a good idea to tell anyone about us. But Danny thinks she might be able to help us figure some of this situation out, because he’s convinced she makes her living using some sort of ability. I think he has a bit of a crush on her. He would love the chance to spend time

with her in person,” she said with a bemused sigh.

“It kills me he had to give up on going to college.” The guilt crept back in, making her voice rough. “He was planning on taking his GED and then an early enrollment into MIT this fall. Full ride at the place of his dreams and a career as a physicist all planned out. All destroyed because I couldn’t move fast enough to avoid a damn drunk driver... or save him from getting crushed to death.”

Her throat squeezed tight—overcome by her brother’s losses, while she lived and was able to get on with her life. Maybe it wasn’t the life she dreamed of for herself, but one on the side of the living nonetheless.

Grace raised her hand to cup the crystal pendant on a thin gold chain around her neck. She was in the habit of leaving it close against her skin to charge over time. She focused her will on the stone. As she did, it warmed to her touch and began to glow faintly.

Releasing the pendant, she picked up a fallen twig from the grass and absently pushed it into the ground, making small abstract patterns with the holes. She paused for a moment, raising her head to watch the white clouds slide across the pure blue sky.

“I got a call from DL last night. He wants me to help him with a case,” she said, finally getting to the pressing topic at hand. She walked through the details of the previous late-night phone call and the breakfast meeting that morning, giving herself a chance to absorb the conversations a second time.

“I have a bad feeling this won’t be a simple case. I sense there’s more going on than I can see right now.” She noticed the twig still in her hand and started poking the ground again, this time in frustration.

“I’ll call Billy and see what he has to say about it. I want to find out if this situation is something he can help us with—see if there’s some way he can figure out what’s going on through his connections on the force.

“DL isn’t too keen on working with the police after they’ve been so

dismissive about the missing girls. Hopefully, with me as mediator, he can put that aside long enough to meet with Billy and find out what we can do.”

She paused, gathering herself before admitting softly, “I’m afraid to go visit Beth at the hospital.”

She closed her eyes in shame at her own cowardice, knowing the fear was justified but feeling weak since she couldn’t suppress it. “I haven’t stepped inside a hospital since my last surgery.”

And she had been planning to keep it that way for as long as possible. The mere thought of the hospital immediately brought back the smells of antiseptic cleaners adding to, instead of covering, the taint of blood, sickness, and death. Brought back the sounds of pain and despair. Recalled the overwhelming presences that crowded her room and nearly drove her over the brink of insanity. It was as vivid as if it happened yesterday, rather than months ago. The idea of facing all those things again was terrifying.

“I’ve got no choice if I’m going to help DL understand what happened to Beth and the other girls. I have to be there in person to touch Beth and get a good reading from her. I need to get her story directly, with no unintentional modifications by DL.”

Determined to conquer her personal demons, Grace sighed and dropped the twig, dusting off her hands as she stood. She removed a neatly folded cloth from her pocket and took some time wiping off the gravestones. Satisfied they were clean, she turned and walked back to the car.

*“Danny, time to get going.”*

Danny glanced up at her from the bottom of the hill and waved to show he heard her.

*“Last round,”* he promised, racing after Joshua, who was expertly using a stick to keep the hoop upright. *“I’ll meet you at the gate.”*

Grace smirked. It would take more than one more round for Danny to catch up with Joshua.

## Chapter 5

Grace hit the autodial for Officer Billy Winiarksi as she drove home from the graveyard. It was time for her to get feedback from another professional about her case.

Billy had several relatives on the force—brothers, uncles, and cousins. His dad was a decorated officer killed in the line of duty. Billy dreamed about being a cop like everyone else in the family. Starting from the time he could make his hand into a pistol and say, “Put ‘em in the air!” He was earning a promising reputation for his dedication, intelligence, and dependable calm. He was hoping to become the youngest detective in city history.

Billy was also Grace’s best friend since childhood. He was the one there for her after her parents died and as she learned how to be a parent to Danny. He helped her piece her mind and body together after the accident. Billy was by her side through all the chaos her new abilities brought with them. He was a rock. He had a reputation for being a no-nonsense, down-to-earth, literal guy. Despite this, he was the only person Grace shared her and Danny’s situation with after the accident.

He picked up on the third ring. “Hey, Gracie.”

She could make out the noise of the busy station in the background. “Hey, Billy. Are you done with your shift?” She raised her voice to be heard above the background conversations.

“Yeah, just finished and was stopping by to see how Uncle Gerald’s case was coming before heading home. Did you finish your case?”

“Yeah, but it looks like something else landed on my plate.”

Grace walked through her conversations with DL. Billy would want to hear everything she had learned about this case in order to consider it from all angles.



“Grace, this sounds a bit farfetched. He’s already gone to the police, and they haven’t found anything. Are you positive you’re not trying to turn a few homeless kids’ skipping town into something more to appease DL?” Annoyance tinged his voice.

Grace let out deep breath. “Billy, you’ve known me too long to believe I would go on a wild goose chase, even for DL. I don’t think it’s only his kids disappearing. I suspect something bigger is happening. I want to see if there’s a connection with other missing persons, maybe prostitutes, in the area.”

“Did you have one of your visions?” he asked with a lowered voice, his tone taking on more focus.

“No. No visions, no flashes, no late night visits with words of inspiration. It’s my good ole investigative instincts. Although, a vision is coming on right now of my foot up your ass if you don’t take me seriously on this one.”

“Okay, okay, Grace. I got it. Your ‘spidey sense’ is telling you that more is going on here.”

Grace ground her teeth, working hard not to come back with a retort that would piss Billy off.

“I’m coming to you as a fellow professional with a problem I need help with. I’m asking you as my friend to do a little bit of work for me and meet with DL about his concerns.”

“So you want me to take advantage of my current position to go around official channels *and* meet with DL about this wild theory?”

“Basically. Dig a little for me and share what you find.”

Silence met her request.

*Shit.* She didn’t expect to get this much push back from Billy. He must be in one of his particular straight and narrow moods today.

“Okay, Billy. If you won’t do it for me, I’ll have to play the ‘Stella card’.”

“What!” A strangled sound followed as Billy worked to get his voice back to a normal volume. “You can’t be serious. You’re bringing the Stella incident into this?”

“Sorry, but it has to be done. I really need you to do this for me. If it takes the ‘Stella card’ being played, you only have yourself to blame.”

“I should never have asked you to get me out of that. I knew you wouldn’t let me forget it.”

“That’s me, the proverbial elephant. Now will you help me?”

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone. “What do you need from me?”

“I’m hoping you can get me information about missing prostitutes, reports about women between their early teens and late twenties who disappeared over the last three years.”

Billy grunted. “Grace, when something happens to these girls, the police rarely hear about it. I’m not sure if I’ll be able to find out anything.”

“I know, but I’m hoping we might get lucky. Even if it’s their rap sheets showing a hard stop on arrests. That might be an indicator.”

Grace imagined the look on Billy’s broad face at the thought of working through three years’ worth of records, computerized or not. It wasn’t a small bit of work she was trying to convince him to do for her.

“Check if you can get Stan in records to dig into it for you. He should be able to check out anything on this age group of females faster than you could do it on your own.”

“Grace...” Billy sighed deeper this time. “The records guys are resources used to work on active investigations, and this is *not* a real investigation.”

“Not yet, but I’m betting it will be,” she said. “Call it ‘a preliminary investigation based on evidence brought forward by a reliable witness’.”

“You want to name DL as the ‘reliable witness’?”

That would not help their case because DL had spent time in jail for

crimes committed in his youth while part of a gang.

“Good point,” she admitted. “Use my name to avoid unnecessary questions. I’m still on friendly terms with Stan. Saying it’s a request from me should help. I’m asking you to put your eyes on this for me, to give me your thoughts on what Stan finds.”

“Okay, I’ll do it. When do you need this by?”

“Yesterday,” she said. “But I’ll take it as soon as I can.”

## Chapter 6

Grace took a deep breath as she stood outside the main entrance of the hospital. Danny slipped next to her and wrapped his arms around her waist, giving her a tight hug.

*“Don’t worry, Gracie,”* his voice was rough in its seriousness. *“This won’t be like before. You’re healed, now, and you have control over your abilities that you didn’t last time. I don’t notice you from even a few feet away. No one else will sense you’re around when we go into the hospital.”*

*“I guess all the practice we did to get this thing under control was worth it, huh?”* Grace’s uneasiness colored her thoughts.

*“You were a slow learner, but you figured it out.”* Danny poked her in her ribs with one finger.

Grace grinned despite herself, letting Danny’s attempt at humor bolster her for what was coming. She turned with renewed determination to look down at his earnest face, careful to focus on the situation and not her underlying emotions.

*“Can you go on up to Beth’s room and make sure no one but DL’s around?”* she asked.

*“Sure. I’ll do the preliminary recon and meet you up there.”* Danny gave her a final two armed squeeze then moved through the walls into the hospital.

Grace gave him a five-minute head start before she walked through the sliding doors that led to the hospital’s interior. She breathed through her mouth in an effort to reduce the impact of the multiple nausea-inducing smells. After a few minutes navigating through the maze of floors and nurses’ stations, Grace found DL standing outside Beth’s room.

He was talking to a short, uniformed police officer who was taking notes on a pad. DL was rocking from heel to toe and back again in his black

Converse tennis shoes, a scowl on his face.

Grace waited a few feet away until their conversation was finished. She exchanged nods with the policeman as he walked by her, recalling his face from her time on the force but not placing a name with it.

DL moved to meet her a few feet from the door. “Everything okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “What was that about?”

DL let out a noisy breath, shaking his head. “They’re still trying to track down Chris. They’re convinced he did this and think I might be protecting him. If I thought he had done it, I would be the first person to try to bring him in. But he’s long gone after the scare he got the other night.

“Right now, I need to focus on Beth, and protecting the other girls.”

DL turned, gesturing for Grace to follow him into room. He approached the bed where a small, bandaged form lay, tubes connecting to both her arms. Grace followed him, stopping at the end of the bed. Danny shifted from the back of the room to stand near the door. He gave her a quick nod to confirm no one else was around to interfere with their conversations.

“*How’s she looking?*” Grace asked him.

“*Good for someone attacked a few days ago. Her aura is stabilized, but there’s something...*”

“*What are you seeing?*” She peered at the sleeping figure, wishing she was able to catch what Danny could see.

“*There’s some sort of black ‘stain,’ I guess you could say, moving around the edges of her aura. I’ve never seen anything like it.*”

“*Do you think it’s from her attack somehow?*”

“*I’m not sure. But be careful when you touch her. I don’t know what this stain is or what it might do to you.*”

Grace nodded her agreement then turned her full attention to Beth.

“Beth, honey?” DL whispered.

The girl’s eyes opened sleepily, revealing a pair of brilliant, emerald green irises and large pupils.

“Beth, honey,” DL said again, putting one hand on her head as he bent close to her. “I’ve brought a friend I’d like you to talk to about what happened.”

Beth’s eyes focused on DL and then moved to take in Grace at the end of the bed.

“Is she a cop?” Her voice, husky and dry, carried a note of worry.

“I’m a private eye, not a cop,” Grace said.

Beth managed to appear skeptical underneath all the bandages covering her face.

“I was a cop before my accident, but now I’m a PI,” Grace amended.

“What accident?” Beth asked, her voice growing stronger and taking on some energy.

“I was in a car accident that killed my little brother and put me in the hospital. Took six months and a dozen surgeries to get my arm and leg working again.” Grace made a point to keep her eyes focused on Beth, despite the urge to glance over to where Danny was standing. She sensed his eyes on her, realizing it wasn’t easy for him to hear this part of their story.

Grace stepped to the side of the bed opposite of DL and rolled up her sleeve for Beth to see the scars covering the skin of her right arm. Pulling away the collar of her shirt, she pointed to her neck, where a thin white line ran from behind her ear to her collar bone on the right side. She was aware of Danny shifting uncomfortably by the door, focusing his gaze on Beth rather than on Grace’s scars.

“Will my scars look like that?” Beth raised a bandaged hand to hover near her face, her voice heavy with concern.

Grace shook her head. “From what DL tells me, the doctors say your wounds will heal well and won’t leave too much scarring. But you will have *some* scars to deal with.”

No sense pulling punches for the kid. She would need to learn to deal with perceptions of disfigurement in order to move on with her life. Personal

experience told her the psychological scars would be more difficult to handle than the physical ones.

“I know how scary it feels being hurt and alone in the hospital. But would it be okay if I asked you a few questions about what happened to you?”

Beth stared at DL, fear clear in her eyes.

DL stroked her head a few times. “It’s hard, Beth. But I believe Grace can help catch the man who did this to you if she can get information about what happened. I’m hoping she’ll be able to stop him from doing this to anyone else. Do you think you can help her?”

Beth swallowed then shifted in the bed.

“Okay,” she said, with a tremor in her voice, not meeting DL’s eyes, “but can I talk to just her?”

DL removed his hand from her head and reached down to squeeze her arm once. “Of course.” He turned to walk to the door. “I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

“Is it okay if I sit down?” Grace asked once DL was out of the room.

“Oh sure, uh, sorry.” The tops of Beth’s cheeks flushed pink over the bandages.

Grace grabbed a chair from the corner and brought it over to the edge of the bed.

“Where do you want me to start?” Beth shifted again, grimacing with the movement of her arms.

“I know about you and Chris and why you were on the street that night. We don’t need to talk about it—I don’t think it’s relevant to the case.” Grace hoped to put Beth at ease by moving past that point. “I want to learn as much as I can about the man who attacked you and why he did it.”

Beth hesitated for a minute, digesting what Grace said.

“Okay, well, I was on the street, doing this ‘favor’ for Chris.” Her eyes begged Grace to accept this version of the truth.

“You were looking for a man who’d help you get the money Chris needed.” Grace prompted Beth to continue.

“Yeah, right,” Beth said. “I saw a car cruising along, checking each of us out, like they all do. The weird thing was when he’d stop the car, someone would go over to chat with him, and he wouldn’t even roll down the windows to talk to them. He would pull back into the road and continue checking us out. It was creepy, but you get all kinds down there.”

Grace nodded, encouraging Beth to continue with the story but making a mental note of the deviation of behavior Beth noticed. Danny would pay particular attention to what Beth was saying and would be able to repeat everything back later when they got home.

“He had a sweet ride, one of those fancy sports cars. I figured he’d have a bunch of money to spend,” Beth continued. “When he came to my spot, I went right up to the curb to meet him, and this time he rolled down the window.”

She took a shuddering breath. “‘What beautiful eyes,’ he said and gave me this huge smile. But something felt off, ya know? I don’t know what it was, but the guy was definitely giving off a major creep vibe.”

Beth’s face crinkled up, followed by a wince when the movement tweaked her wounds.

“I started to back off, but then it felt like something grabbed a hold of me. It was pushing me toward his car, and I couldn’t do anything to fight it, no matter how hard I tried. That’s when I got scared. I wanted to yell for Chris to come stop this guy, but I couldn’t even open my mouth.” Beth began crying, heavy sobs racking her body.

“I don’t remember anything after that,” she said between sobs. “I woke up here, looking like this, and I don’t want to remember any more about how it happened!”

Grace reached out to grasp Beth’s hand in both of hers, stroking the back of her palm to calm her. Grace was willing to attempt a reading on Beth



in her current state because she wouldn't have to relive the memories with Grace during the reading.

Grace brought her awareness to her hands and visualized a dark material sliding away from her fingers and palms and up her arms, leaving her hands in direct contact with Beth's small one. The vision came quickly.

Grace felt the fear that filled Beth's body as she moved with her toward the man in the car. The man appeared to be in his mid-fifties, somewhat distinguished in appearance, with gelled and styled salt and pepper hair. A strong jaw accented his broad smile, filled with capped teeth. His high cheekbones were topped by piercing gray eyes that stared at Beth, the smile not reaching them at all. It was a handsome face, but something lurked there beneath the surface giving rise to the "creep vibe" Beth described.

The broad smile broke when a teenage boy distracted Beth's attention by grabbing her arm and attempting to pull her away. Grace was aware of the pressure on Beth's arm, but it was nothing compared to the pressure pushing her to go with the man in the car.

Without warning, the man's eyes morphed to a dark shade of brown, and his features contorted into a mask of rage. Without taking his gaze from Beth, he reached over to the seat next to him. He pulled out a long knife and lunged out of the car to strike cat-quick at Beth's face, arms, and torso.

When the boy rushed in to attack the man with a pistol, the man jumped back into his car and slammed it into gear. He drove away with a screech of tires. As the pain in her face and arms flared to agony, Beth collapsed like a puppet with cut strings.

Grace came back to herself, feeling Danny's hand resting on her shoulder as she struggled to pull herself together and separate herself from Beth's memories. Working past a fatigue that weighed down her whole body, she visualized the dark material sliding back down her wrists and hands, cutting off her connection to Beth.

*"Are you okay?"* Danny asked.

“*Yeah, I will be in a sec.*” She sighed, turning her focus to Beth in the hospital bed.

Beth’s tears were slowing, and her breath was more regular. “I’m sorry, but I don’t remember anything else.” The disappointment was evident in her voice.

“That’s okay,” Grace said, letting her sympathy show in her tone. “You’ve been through a lot, and what you shared with me will help with the case.”

“Are you sure?” Hope lit her teary eyes. “Will you catch him?”

“I’ll do my best. I promise,” Grace said.

“Thank you.” Beth settled back deeper into the bed. “I’m really tired. Is it okay if I rest for a bit?”

“Yeah, sure thing.” Grace let go of Beth’s hand and stood to leave.

“Will you come back and see me again?” Her voice slurred with sleepiness.

“Yes, I’ll come back to see you,” Grace said as she moved to the door. “Sleep tight, Beth.”

“Mmhhh,” was the answer from the bed as Beth slipped into sleep.

Grace found DL outside the room waiting anxiously.

“Any luck?” His tone was hesitant but his face hopeful.

“Not much, but it’s a start,” Grace assured him. “I’ll reach out to Officer Winiarksi with what Beth was able to remember and see if it matches up to anything he’s found on his end. We’ll be able to compare notes when we meet on Tuesday.”

DL nodded his thanks and turned to reenter Beth’s room. Danny joined Grace as she started back through the maze, happy to be heading out of the hospital.

“*Did you read anything from her?*” Danny asked.

“*Yes, I did. It looks like we’re going to need outside help on this one.*” She shuddered, remembering the inescapable pull she felt from the man

with changing eyes.

## Chapter 7

Danny charged out of his room. *“It’s Billy. And DL is with him.”*

*“Oh, boy. Let’s hope they can be civil to each other long enough to get into the house.”* Grace opened the door to find Billy and DL standing a good distance apart on the steps, eying one another.

“Hey, Gracie.” Billy slipped by her into the house while Grace turned to greet DL, who was standing with crossed arms on the stairs.

“Good to see you, DL.” Grace moved out of the way so he could enter.

“I hope this isn’t a colossal waste of my time, Grace.” DL confronted her after moving a few steps into the house. “I should be out there trying to keep an eye on my kids, not trying to convince another closed-minded cop that my girls are in danger.”

“Let’s give Billy a chance to show us what he found. He brought some things with him that’ll help us understand what might be happening to your girls.”

DL raised his eyebrows at her but didn’t contradict her.

“Billy’s getting his stuff set up on the table. Why don’t we get you introduced, and you can review what he brought?” Grace led DL over to the table and got Billy’s attention.

“DL, this is my friend Billy, an officer with the thirty-second precinct. He has information that might help us understand what’s going on from a broader perspective.”

DL nodded to Billy. “Yes, Billy and I met on the way here.”

“And this is DL,” Grace continued. “He’s the one who asked me to take on the case. His girls are the ones disappearing.”

Billy shook hands with DL with no outward response to the tattoos or DL’s stern demeanor.

“My condolences for the girls who were lost,” Billy said. “How’s the one in the hospital doing?”

“Beth is doing fine.” DL took a seat at the table. “She’ll be able to go home soon and wait for her surgery to be scheduled.”

“Beth,” Billy repeated. “I’m happy to hear that.”

Billy turned to Grace. “And how did your interview with Beth go?”

“It sucked, but I got through it.”

“Sounds like you faced your demons head on,” he said with satisfaction.

Grace shrugged. “I’m not sure you would say that. I almost threw up all over DL’s shoes by the time I made it to her room.”

DL barked a laugh at her statement but didn’t disagree.

“The hospital smells always get to me,” she continued.

“Yeah, that smell gets me, too,” Billy admitted. “Too many policemen in the family, too many visits to the hospital for gunshot wounds. I’m not looking forward to it being me any time soon.”

DL looked at Billy, his face softening and his body becoming less rigid as he absorbed Billy’s statement.

“Beth wasn’t able to tell me much about what happened that night,” Grace said, looking pointedly at DL before returning her gaze to Billy. “As you can imagine, she was still pretty emotional about the experience and couldn’t share more than a brief description of the man who attacked her.”

“Would you recognize him in the mug books? Do you want to come down to the station? Have the police artist draw up a picture of him?” Billy asked.

Grace considered it for a few seconds. “No, the guy Beth described isn’t someone who’s been in trouble with the law before—too clean cut and professional looking. But what does that mean we’re looking for? Someone up the food chain in drug rings or a crime family?”

“It would be a high risk of exposure for that type,” DL said. “No

need to go trolling for girls on the street corner. Might be sex trafficking, but why such an open and obvious approach?"

"It's possible he likes it personal—the thrill of the chase," she proposed.

"Maybe," DL said.

"Did Stan find out anything? Any other girls or women missing the last two years?" she asked.

"Yes." Billy sounded satisfied. "Turns out Dayan Springs has more than two dozen main locations for prostitution inside the city limits. Plus several hot spots which come and go."

"I didn't know that," Grace said. "Was Stan aware of that before he looked into this for you?"

"I'm sure he was." Billy laughed with chagrin. "Because he bet me fifty bucks he would get me the information I needed in two shifts. Fool that I am, I took him up on the bet and lost." Billy rubbed his nose absently.

"Turns out, last year, a city councilman's wife got upset about her husband's late night escapades and threw a massive stink. The Chief did a crackdown on prostitution in response. It was more for show than for real effect. But Stan helped by identifying the prime prostitution areas based on earlier arrest records and interviews with patrol officers across the various precincts."

"Well, it's great for us. Sorry you lost fifty dollars, though. Did he find something to help our case?"

"Stan said it was weird. In the past year, since he last checked, several prostitutes dropped off the radar. But they weren't arrested for prostitution or possession. He followed up with a few patrolmen, too. They confirmed those girls hadn't been around for some time."

"They wouldn't notice this earlier?" she asked.

"There's turnover at those locations. But when asked, they admitted a few of the most senior girls were no longer working those areas."

“I take it there wasn’t a major social program underway to remove ladies from the streets in the last year?” Grace asked.

“No, Stan confirmed that too. The data aligns with what you thought. But nothing conclusive, yet.”

“So where does that get us?” DL asked.

“We have three facts.” Grace ticked them off on her fingers. “One. Young homeless girls disappearing. Two. Prostitutes aren’t seen at their regular locations anymore. And three. A girl whose attacker convinces her to approach him against her will. And then he tries to hurt her when someone intervenes.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re connected,” Billy countered.

“I know. But I’d like you and DL to compare notes in person and test for a connection.”

“Stan and I marked on the map where the missing prostitutes frequented. Each of these areas circled in red marker are where these women were last seen. Or at least are places they worked the most often.”

Billy pointed to several circles positioned at different locations on the map.

“That’s all we’ve identified in common for the women.”

The circles clustered around six or seven main areas. The number of circles, and some of the locations, surprised Grace. Even though Billy had told her about the number of places in the city where prostitution was happening, seeing it on a map like this made it real.

“DL, why don’t you add the information about your girls to the map?” Grace suggested. “It might let us see if there’s a pattern to the locations.”

DL stood to take the piece of notepaper he had showed Grace earlier out of his pocket, this one updated with locations.

“Is it okay to write on the map?” DL asked Billy.

“Sure,” Billy agreed. “Sounds like a great idea to help us visualize

the whole story. How about you mark the girls' information in blue. Then we can keep the two groups separate." He held out a blue marker.

"Yeah, that makes sense." DL took the marker and compared the map to the list in his hand. "Can you help orient me? Where's the intersection of St. Luke's and Grossman?"

Grace's attention came back to the discussion as she heard DL say, "That's the last one."

She nodded to herself with satisfaction when she saw all but a few of the blue and red circles overlapped each other. She walked around the table, trying to get a view from all sides.

*"I was right. They're connected, at least by location."*

"You sure were, Gracie. But what does it mean?" Danny leaned in to look at the map.

*"That's what I'm hoping we can figure out with all this brain power in the room."*

"There is a pattern, at least a general one," she said to the room.

Billy shook his head. "I didn't believe you were right, Grace, even after finding several women matching the profile." He motioned toward the map with a marker.

"It was great idea to put them on the map, Billy," Grace said.

"Yep. But adding DL's information in another color helps. It shows the overlap well without losing the original information."

"But what does it mean?" DL asked. "I mean, beyond the obvious overlaps. How will it help us find the guy who's doing this?"

"I don't believe it will," Billy admitted.

"Didn't your original list have dates?" Grace asked.

"Yes, dates the girls disappeared." DL reviewed his list of names. "Or at least approximate dates."

"I've got dates, too." Billy shuffled through his notes.

"Approximations for when the prostitutes went missing or dropped off the



radar.”

“If we add the dates to the map, starting with the earliest one and moving through to Beth, we might see a pattern,” Grace suggested.

Billy and DL worked through their lists, adding dates to each circle on the map.

“It’s not making sense,” DL said, when they finished, examining all the marks on the map. “It’s only a random mess.”

“We’re just missing something that will pull it all together,” Grace said. “We should let this sit for a few days to see if something comes together. In the meantime, I have another idea on who I can connect with to get additional help.”

## Chapter 8

Grace walked up the sidewalk to the front door of their townhouse, the heaviness after Beth's reading still dragging on her. Every time she used her abilities, it left her drained, achy, and cranky afterward. She was getting better at using less energy during the readings, engaging less of herself. But there was still a price to pay later.

She spotted an envelope taped to the door and yanked it down before unlocking the door.

*"What's that?"* Danny peered around her to see the note.

*"Looks like a note from Sophie."* Grace dropped her car keys and backpack on the side table as she opened the envelope and scanned the note inside. *"She says she has a client at seven tomorrow night but will be here right afterward. Typical Sophie to leave a note rather than a text or voice mail."*

*"Great!"* Danny turned to go up the stairs. *"I'm glad she'll still make it to my party!"*

*"Danny, wait a minute. We need to talk. I really think we should reconsider having Sophie be part of your birthday party."*

Danny turned away from the stairs to face her, giving her a hurt look. *"Gracie, you promised we would share our secret with Sophie tomorrow. You promised me as a birthday present."*

The guilt squeezed her chest. There weren't many material things she was able to give him these days. So when he asked for a party and for her to invite Sophie, she hadn't had the heart to say no.

*"I need to talk to Sophie about DL's missing girls and the man that was mesmerizing them. She might be able to help us figure out what's going on. And talk to her about my abilities, to see if she can help me figure out more about what's going on with me."*

She scrubbed a hand over her face. *“We’re risking enough just for me to talk about my ability to see ghosts. I don’t think it’s a good idea for her to know I have one living with me, especially you.”*

*“Well, maybe it’s time to trust someone besides Billy. Particularly someone who might know a thing or two about what’s happening with me.”* Danny’s face reddened. *“Things aren’t always about you, Gracie. Maybe I would like to have more than two people in my life that know I exist!”* He turned and ran up the stairs.

Grace stood in place as Danny ran to his room and slammed the door. *Great, Grace. Way to spoil his birthday!*

With Danny sulking up in his room, she went through the townhouse, moving from one crystal geode to the next. The geodes were around all the rooms, sitting on tables and bookshelves and in nooks and crannies. They ranged in size from small knickknacks to a large centerpiece on the dining room table.

She touched the surface of each geode with the fingertips of her right hand, focusing her attention on the inner glow emanating from the crystal. To a casual observer, it would appear the glow was a play of the light over the crystals or they were working lamps. The larger crystals had electrical cords running from them to outlets to encourage the idea, but there were no light bulbs in them.

Grace concentrated on sending energy into each geode as she touched them. Not too much energy, as drained as she was, but enough to make the spark a bit brighter in each. A real recharging needed to wait until she recovered. But she always made it a habit to walk through the house each time she came home to make sure every crystal got a small boost to be sure Danny always had access to as much energy as he needed to manifest whenever he wanted.

This was something she and Danny stumbled upon a few months back. She was trying to learn as much as she could about her abilities and

how to deal with them. Danny knew about storing energy in crystals from his science classes. They worked together to see if Grace's ability was able to do something similar.

Danny helped set up what he called a "systematic evaluation" of different crystal types to find the best ones for storing her energy. They narrowed it down to a few types. Now they were one of the most frequent visitors to the local shops specializing in crystals.

Grace wasn't able to get the energy back for herself. But once she stored it in the crystals, Danny could use it to become corporeal. The more physical presence he wanted, the more energy it took. Over the months since their discovery, Danny learned to use only enough to have a physical presence to work with his computer.

He was also able to become corporeal by touching Grace and using her energy directly. But they tried to avoid using the direct method too much. It was harder to regulate the energy flow under direct contact, and it could lead to a habit of manifestation whenever they touched.

Grace finished up the crystals downstairs and in her office upstairs and then went to check on Danny. She knocked twice on the door, but there was no answer. She knocked again before turning the knob and gently pushing the door open.

Grace smiled to herself as she moved across the room, weaving her way through the mess cluttering the space. Danny made up for the lack of clothes strewn around the room in the number of books, papers, and "projects" covering every surface. The agreement was, he was allowed to do what he wanted in his bedroom, but the mess wasn't allowed to spread to the rest of the house.

Sure enough, Danny was hard at work, typing away on the computer, head phones on, music blaring. From what Grace saw, gazing over his head at the computer screen, he was already researching mind control abilities.

Grace put her hand in between the computer screen and Danny's

eyes wiggling her fingers. He tried to move to one side to see around her, but she kept shifting her hand until he pulled off his headphones and faced her with a frown.

*“I’m sorry, kiddo. You’re right. You deserve a chance to continue being friends with Sophie as much as I deserve a chance to learn about my abilities.”*

He sat looking up at her, his face twisted in a partial scowl, but hope showing in his eyes.

*“Yes, you can have Sophie be a part of your birthday party, okay?”*

Danny let out a whoop and jumped up from his chair to squeeze Grace in a tight hug.

*“Thank you, Gracie! Thank you! Best birthday present this decade!”*

*“Bold statement for an eleven-year-old.”* Grace shook her head and squeezed him back.

*“Only for twenty-four more hours.”* He grinned before turning to drop into his seat and plop on his headphones.

Grace held her wrist in front of the screen to show Danny the time on her watch. He finally focused on the watch rather than the screen behind it and turned to give her a quick nod without removing his head phones.

She raised an eyebrow at him, and he grinned and nodded a few more times before returning to the screen. She had to remind him on occasion not to stay manifested for too long. He got nightmares if he did. They didn’t have a real explanation of why, but they had learned to monitor things to keep the dreams at bay.

She moved back through the room, touching the various geodes and replenishing the ones Danny had used to manifest. She passed by his ashes where he kept them in an old science fair trophy. Another example of his special sense of humor. Knowing Danny, he wouldn’t come up for air for several more hours. This gave her the time she needed to recharge herself before work.

Grace changed into a comfortable t-shirt and some loose sweat pants then went to her exercise room. Her run that morning gave her an aerobic workout for the day. But yoga and some meditation were needed to unwind and re-energize her body and mind.

After her accident, she learned that her intuition was strongest after meditating. As she let go of the tension, her mind was open to free association, and problems solved themselves. She willed her body to relax and focused her mind on her breathing. She would need all the intuition she had to handle the situation with DL's girls and the man who was stalking them.

## Chapter 9

Grace sat fidgeting on the sofa, her undamaged leg bouncing. She glanced over at Danny, who was pretending to read a book on his Kindle, legs dangling over the arm of the chair across from her.

Grace noticed he hadn't "turned" a page for the last five minutes, his eyes scanning the same page over and over again. She wasn't the only one nervous about the evening. But she was the only one not trying to hide it.

Danny laid his Kindle on the table with a sigh, sitting up to face her. *"I can't concentrate on my book with you bouncing your leg like that."*

Grace made an effort to stop the motion of her leg.

*"Really? You're going to pretend you're not nervous about Sophie and your big 'reveal' tonight?"* She raised her eyebrows at him.

*"Yeah, a bit nervous. But mostly I'm excited I'll get to talk with Sophie again. I've missed her."*

*"I'm sure she's missed you, too. But I'm having second, third, and fourth thoughts about sharing our situation."*

*"Gracie, we've been over this. We need to share with Sophie so she can help us understand our abilities and I can get my friend back."*

*"I agree. I just don't believe we should tell her everything—my ability to see ghosts, my ability to read objects, your ability to manifest from my energy. All that might be too much to share at one time."*

*"Why should we keep any secrets from her?"*

*"I can't help wondering what this evening will mean for you and me. I'm not even sure Sophie can help us. And what if she freaks out about what we tell her, and she stops being a friend?"* She bit one corner of her lip. In spite of her best efforts, her leg started bouncing again.

*"Sophie's been our friend for a couple years. She won't freak out. In fact, she'll be happy I'm still around, even in this state."* He motioned to his

body.

Grace reached up to cup the crystal pendant hanging at her throat. Its gentle warmth eased her tension, and she took a few deep breaths to relax before releasing it.

*“Not that long ago, you didn’t believe in all this stuff, yourself, Gracie.”* Danny gave her one of his mischievous grins. *“And now you have your own powers and are friends with a Medium.”*

*“I’m glad we got to know her and became friends. Especially you, since you weren’t exactly overwhelmed with female friends at the time.”*

*“Could say the same thing for you, Gracie. Especially the really girlie ones.”*

*“All right, point scored, smart ass.”*

*“It was great to have someone who wasn’t intimidated by me or the grown up stuff I was interested in and enjoyed listening to me talk about whatever I was into.”*

*“She loved you, Danny. The accident and your death devastated her.”*

*“And she was a good friend to you, too. Despite how badly she was feeling, Sophie was always there to help you whenever you needed errands run or a pep talk.”*

*“Yes, Sophie knew when I needed to talk or when I wanted someone there without needing to have a conversation. She was better at it than Billy.”* She smiled smugly.

*“But you never talked to Sophie about your abilities—all that time?”*

*“No, I wanted one person in my life who didn’t think I was crazy. The doctors would have locked me up if I hadn’t learned to keep what I was experiencing to myself.”*

*“Those jerks treated you like a crazy person because you saw things they couldn’t. I wish we had known about materializing me, then. I would have shocked their closed little minds and given them all a heart attack.”*



Grace laughed half-heartedly at the image as a hitching pain cramped her chest at the memories.

*“I didn’t tell Sophie about the ghosts, or the readings, or you. I thought it was safer to keep it between us.”*

*“But you told Billy.”*

*“Billy is ‘family,’ Danny. You can’t compare knowing someone your whole life with knowing someone a few years, no matter how close you are.”*

*“But tonight we’ll tell Sophie all about it.”*

*“Tonight will change things, for better or worse. I’m praying for the better. But let’s be a little cautious, not overwhelm her. We can tell her I can see ghosts and show her how you can manifest. If that goes well, I’ll get her up to speed on the readings part later, okay?”*

Danny’s face grew pinched, and he looked like he would continue arguing with her. At that moment, the doorbell rang. Danny turned to glance at the front door, then looked back at Grace. He drew in a deep breath, releasing it forcefully through his nose.

*“Okay, Gracie. It’s a deal.”*

*“Great. Are you ready?”*

*“Born ready.”* His special mischievous grin sprang to life across his face.

With that, he jumped from his seat and rushed upstairs to his room to wait for Grace’s signal.

## Chapter 10

Grace opened the door to catch Sophie staggering under the weight of a large, wrapped package, her expression sheepish.

“I know you said not to bring presents,” she apologized as she squeezed past Grace and into the house. “But I found these last year at Thomas & Jean’s used book store downtown and couldn’t resist buying them. Now I know why!” Sophie lowered the package to the table with a thump, smoothing out the ribbon on top.

Grace joined her at the table to admire the colorful, periodic-table-themed wrapping paper. “What is it?” She moved to peak at the card on top of the package.

“Oh, no.” Sophie slapped her hand away. “Not until we’ve blown out the candles and eaten the cake and ice cream.”

“Okay, okay!” Grace raised her hands in submission and headed toward the kitchen. “Let’s get those candles, then.”

Sophie followed her, her face lit with excitement.

Grace brought down Danny’s golden birthday cake with chocolate frosting from the top of the fridge. Few people would agree with having a birthday party for a brother who had been dead for almost a year. Fewer still would bring a present and be eager to share in the ice cream and cake. But with Sophie’s line of work, this might be a normal thing.

Sophie settled into a chair and put out three plates and forks while Grace lit the candles on the cake. Sophie leaned forward once Grace finished with the twelve candles. She had added one more for this year.

“Wait a minute,” Grace said. “I need to get something from upstairs. I’ll be right back.”

Grace left Sophie eyeing the lit cake and hurried into the living room. She didn’t need to step outside the room to call Danny, but she thought

it would be better to manage his entrance from the other room.

“*Let’s roll!*” She motioned to Danny who had already snuck out of his room and was peering over the banister.

At her cue, he rushed down the steps two at a time to come tearing across the living room. He wasn’t manifest yet but was obviously ready to get his party kicked off.

Grace held up her hand to slow him down and led the way. As she entered the kitchen, she began singing “Happy Birthday” in a loud voice. Sophie jumped in right along with her up through “...you look like a monkey, and you smell like a zoo.”

“Blow out the candles,” Grace said with a wide grin.

Grace grabbed Danny’s hand where he was hovering behind her and pushed her energy into him. Before Sophie released the giant breath she held, Danny manifested and ran in to blow out the candles, some of which took extra effort to get out.

Sophie froze, the deep breath unreleased, as she stared with wide eyes at Danny.

Danny, sporting a mischievous grin, waved vigorously at her. “Hi Sophie.”

Sophie finally released her breath and faced Grace. “Is he real?” she asked with a small squeak.

“Real as a ghost can get,” Grace said, enjoying the surprised look on Sophie’s face. “I thought this type of thing was all in a day’s work for you,” she teased.

“Ghosts are *not* all in a day’s work.”

Sophie turned her attention back to Danny, who had finished cutting an enormous piece of cake for himself and was smothering it with scoops of vanilla ice cream. “Reading cards, yes, seeing ghosts...not what I do.”

“Well, welcome to my world,” Grace said.

Grabbing the knife, she cut pieces of the cake for herself and Sophie

as Danny shoveled large chunks of food into his mouth. Luckily, the food disappeared like it would for a normal person, although where it went, they'd never figured out.

Grace handed Sophie a slice of cake with a scoop of ice cream. She started on her own food while she waited for Sophie to decide whether to eat or ask questions. Now came the tricky part. How would Sophie react?

Without warning, Sophie jumped up from her chair. She grabbed Danny in a hug, squeezing him tight enough that he dropped the forkful of cake heading to his mouth.

“Hey!” Danny grouched as the food landed on the table.

Sophie continued to hug Danny as she turned to Grace, tears in her eyes. “How did this happen? When did this happen? How long has he been here?” The questions spilled from her in rapid fire.

Grace felt a moment of guilt. She hadn't stopped to consider how seeing Danny again might affect Sophie. Her focus had been on her fears for herself and Danny.

“Enough hugging, more eating,” Danny said through a full mouth of mushy cake.

Sophie planted a kiss on the top of Danny's head and took her seat, drying her eyes with a party napkin and picking up a fork.

“Spill!” she said, jabbing her fork at Grace and then Danny. “Tell me everything!”

Grace walked Sophie through their story as they finished their food and Danny had two more helpings. She talked about the moment she had awakened in the hospital, terrified at seeing the ghosts of people who'd died there, continuing up through learning how to manifest Danny. Sophie sat through the whole retelling, mesmerized, her fork moving on autopilot from the plate to her mouth.

“What do you think?” Grace asked, once she finished getting her up to speed.

“It’s great!” Sophie reached out to take Danny’s hand, which he allowed, his cheeks reddening. “It’s wonderful Danny’s back, no matter how it happened.”

“But that’s what we were hoping you could tell us!” Grace said. “What happened to me? How is this happening?” She pointed between herself and Danny.

“Goodness, Grace.” Sophie threw her hands up. “I don’t know what’s going on here. How could I?”

“Whoa, what do you mean you don’t know?” Danny asked, his attention on the conversation now that he’d cleaned his plate.

“But…” Grace’s voice faltered as her hope began to fade. “We thought you would help us figure it all out.”

Sophie shook her head, looking at Grace and Danny with compassion.

“Like I said earlier, I’m not a clairvoyant who can see ghosts or emanations. The tarot reading I do is by reading auras. The cards are for the clients to have something to focus on. They help me translate what I’m seeing in the clients’ auras. But I never see ghosts or interact with them. I’m not that type of Paranorm.”

## Chapter 11

“Paranorm?” Grace and Danny said together.

A flash of dismay crossed Sophie’s face before a guarded expression replaced it. A chill moved down Grace’s spine as her open and flamboyant friend turned quiet.

“*What just happened?*” Danny’s exuberance drained away as he looked between Grace and Sophie.

“*I’m guessing she said something she shouldn’t have.*” Grace shrugged.

“*The ‘Paranorm’ thing?*”

“*That’s what I would bet.*”

Sophie sat, her lips pursed, her gaze flicking between Grace and Danny. She gave a deep sigh. “Okay, I guess it’s only fair for me to tell you more, since you told me about your abilities.”

“Yes, it is.” The tightness in Grace’s shoulders lessened.

“I’m not sure where to start, but here goes,” Sophie said. “This ability you possess, seeing and talking to ghosts like Danny. You aren’t the only one who can do these things. There are several clairvoyants in the city.” She waved her hand over her shoulder in the general direction of the street. “In fact, some of them live in this community with us.”

“Now that’s way cool!” Danny said, his excitement returning.

“How is it I never saw anything special about anyone in the neighborhood?” Grace asked, irritated with herself for not figuring it out.

“We value our privacy as much as you and Danny do, and we fear exposure as much as you do.”

Grace nodded her understanding. “How many are there? Is there a whole group of these ‘Paranorms,’ like a club, or gang, or something?”

Sophie laughed, shaking her head. “Nothing so sinister. The only

way we are like a syndicate is we are all family, distant cousins and such.”

“Can we meet more of them?” Danny pressed her.

Grace imagined his scientific mind was already moving into investigation mode at the discovery of an entire culture of people living unnoticed in the city.

A thousand questions were rolling through her mind, but she focused on the most important one at the moment.

“Can one of them help me with my ability? *Will* one of them help me?” She tried to keep the pleading out of her voice, her hope once again rising.

Sophie looked down at the table. “I’ve already told you more than I should.”

She held up her hand as Grace started to object. “Our family is sworn to secrecy for our own protection, and for reasons I won’t go into right now.”

“But how can it be a secret? You’re out there doing readings in broad daylight. Isn’t that the opposite of keeping things secret?”

“Ever hear of hiding in plain sight? What I do is a distraction to focus everyone’s mind on something they can almost trust. The people who come are one of three types: the curious unbeliever, the true believer, and the disbeliever wanting to prove it’s all a hoax. I read right off which type they are from their auras and then give them just enough to keep them guessing if it’s all real or not.”

“A *great strategy*.” Danny smiled in appreciation.

“*But not one that gets us closer to getting answers*,” Grace grumped.

“Back to your original question about talking to other Paranorms. I believe your abilities allow for an exception.” Sophie paused, looking back and forth between them.

“There’s someone I can try to get you in touch with who may be able to help you with your situation.”

“Another Paranorm? Somebody in your family?” Grace asked.

Sophie hesitated, her mouth twisting. “Not exactly.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Grace asked, getting annoyed again.

Sophie held up her hands in pleading gesture. “I’m doing the best I can here. This is way outside my comfort zone. I’ll do whatever I can to help you and Danny, but please don’t ask me anything more. I’m in enough trouble already for sharing this much.”

Grace stopped herself from continuing in interrogation mode. Getting Sophie into trouble with her family was not her goal—getting answers was.

“*What do you think, Danny?*” She turned her focus on her brother. “*Do we trust Sophie and go for a meeting with this person she believes might help?*”

Danny didn’t hesitate. “*I trust her. Besides, it’s the only valid choice we have, right?*”

“Okay.” Grace turned back to Sophie. “How soon can you set up this meeting?”

Sophie sagged back into her chair. “I’ll check this weekend and find out if he’ll see you.”

“*If he’ll see me?*”

“This will be on his terms or not at all. You need to accept that.”

“Gracie,” Danny said. “I used my birthday wish to get us some answers. Don’t blow it for me on my big day!”

“You’re not supposed to tell what you wished for, you dope.” Grace punched him playfully in the shoulder. “Sophie, I’m sorry I’ve put you in this position. I appreciate whatever you can do to get me connected with this guy.”

“Great! Let’s open the presents!” Danny pushed his chair back and shooed them both toward the living room.

“Present time it is,” Sophie said with a relieved smile, rising from



her chair to follow Danny's lead.

"Definitely," Grace agreed relieved that the conversation was turning a lighter topic.

Grace could use help from Danny's wish to get answers during the meeting with Sophie's contact. Answers to her questions on her abilities and answers about the mind controlling abilities the attacker was using, as well. Knowing she would be able to leverage her abilities and her training meant she was ready to take DL's case on herself.

## Chapter 12

Grace rang the delivery doorbell at the back entrance to *Dhamma Ink*, DL's tattoo parlor. It was a place popular across all the city's demographics and was one of many New Age type establishments that had sprung up in this part of Dayan Springs, in an area that was becoming a hot spot for alternative shopping and entertainment.

The back door opened to reveal a shyly smiling Zack. His gelled platinum blond hair stuck up in a series of spikes that followed the line of his skull like a rooster's comb. The ensemble of black t-shirt, jeans, and unlaced biker boots highlighted his pale skin.

"Good morning, Zack," Grace greeted him with a broad smile, careful not to brush up against him as he moved aside to let her into the back storage area. Zack was sensitive to physical contact after suffering severe beatings at the hands of his step-father. He was now free from his biological family and under the supervision of DL and Jennifer, where he'd truly blossomed over the past two years.

"*Heya, Zach, buddy. Good to see ya.*" Danny's voice was barely a whisper as he followed Grace in through the door, a wistful smile passing across his face.

Danny had often stayed at DL's center after school when Grace needed to work in the afternoons. The boys had met there and become close friends after Zack came to live with DL and Jennifer. Despite the five years difference in age, Danny and Zack hit it off right away. Their main activity was spending hours co-designing and printing a fantasy comic book for local sale.

They considered themselves the dynamic duo: Zack was the graphic artist and Danny was the dialogue writer. The comic had quite a following until Danny's death, and Grace knew Danny missed the time he used to

spend putting it together with Zack. That was one of the painful outcomes of not sharing Danny’s situation with anyone, her little brother losing his closest friend. Another thing Grace tried not to feel guilty about.

“DL’s getting everything ready,” Zack said, his face beaming as he led her into the main area of the store. “I can’t wait for you to see the design I did. It turned out great.”

*“I can’t believe you’re getting a tattoo!”* Danny shook his head in disbelief. *“My big sister’s getting inked,”* he teased her, the usual mischievous smile creeping onto his face.

*“The only reason I’m doing this is because of what it means to Zack,”* Grace reminded him. *“He promised it would be something small and tasteful. I couldn’t turn him down when he said he wanted to do it as a birthday present to you.”*

*“Yeah, yeah, but it’s just too cool.”*

Grace made her way to where DL was setting up his equipment next to a reclining chair. He was a walking testament to his art. He had tattoos over most of his body—Buddhist iconography and other symbols of faith and mysticism spanning the world’s religions.

DL looked up and raised his eyebrows at her. “Ready to adorn your body with beautiful art?”

“I think I am,” Grace said, looking between Zack and DL. “At least I’m in the right hands to get it done.”

“Alrighty then. Take a seat.” DL motioned Grace toward the chair.

She settled in with Danny standing on the side opposite DL and Zack.

*“Do you want me to hold your hand while they do it?”* His eyes searched hers.

*“I’ll be okay, kiddo.”* She chuckled, flashing back to all the grueling physical challenges she went through during the police academy and the post-accident rehab. This couldn’t be as hard as those.

“Zack came up with the design all by himself. I’ll let him tell you about it,” DL said, catching her attention.

Zack stepped up beside her, a piece of drawing paper in his hands. “I know it hasn’t been easy since Danny died, and I wanted to give you something to help you feel connected to him.” He unrolled the paper to show the tattoo design.

Grace leaned over to see a beautiful, detailed rendering of a raven in flight with a scroll cradled in its claws.

“Ravens can mean several things in mythology. But the thing I like best is they can be messengers between us and the beyond and allow us to communicate with the dead. I thought it might make you feel like you could stay in touch with Danny wherever he is.”

Tears gathered in her eyes as she looked at the drawing. “What does the scroll say?”

“It says ‘Knight of the Light.’ That part’s for you, ’cause you’re out there fighting the good fight,” Zack said.

Grace raised her gaze to Zack’s earnest face. “And where did you come up with this phrase?” she asked, having a feeling she might already know.

“I found it on the Internet one day. It popped up when I was playing around with more design ideas.”

Grace kept her eyes on Zack but her attention went back to Danny. “*Am I right you might have something to do with this?*”

“*Maybe a little.*” Danny showed no guilt about it. “*I wanted to make the tattoo more about both of us. To put something in there about you, too.*”

“*We’ll talk about your unauthorized escapades when we get home, Mister.*” She could only pretend to be annoyed since the design came out so striking.

“Do you like it?” Zack fidgeted in the silence.

“It’s fabulous,” Grace answered. “Where is it going to go?”

“We should put it on your left shoulder, near your heart,” DL answered for Zack. “That’s for several reasons.” He ticked them off on his fingers one by one. “One, symbolically, it will be near the source of the messages you want to share with Danny—your heart. Two, it will be in a place where you can keep it covered, and it won’t impact your professional image. And three, for practical reasons, we’ll use the left shoulder to avoid all the scar tissue on your right side.”

Grace grimaced at the mention of her injured arm, but the reasoning made sense. “How long will this take?”

“About three to four hours to finish all the details Zack put into the design,” DL said. “Are you ready to do it all in one sitting?”

“Sure.” Grace prepared to turn over onto her stomach. “I guess I need to strip down to give you access to my shoulder?”

“Yep,” DL said, “down to the bare naked for this one.”

Zack turned red as he fumbled to set the design down on the table. “Um, I’ll go work on more designs while DL does the tattoo.”

“Great idea,” DL said, already returning his attention to preparing the inks. “Jason is coming in this afternoon for the final session on his tattoo. I want you to compare the designs you made against the in-progress pictures to make sure we’re on track there.”

“On it,” Zack said, backing out of the room, relief obvious on his face.

“Great kid and fantastic designer,” DL said as Zack left. “But still shy about bodies.”

Grace laughed as she started to unbutton her shirt, giving a “go on” motion to Danny with her head to follow Zack.

“*Terrific.*” He sounded relieved as he left the room. “*Personal space and all that.*”

“*I’ll catch up with you in a few hours.*”

As Grace got settled on her stomach, she stated matter-of-factly,

“I’m going to take the case to find out what’s happening to your girls.”

Grace sensed DL stop moving for a moment, before he said, “Thanks, Grace. But I’m not sure what you can do to help. It seems like we didn’t get very far working with Billy.”

“I’m making connections that should help. Can you get me something from one of the girls who was taken?”

“Like what?” DL asked as he put on a pair of latex gloves.

“A favorite piece of clothing, a brush or comb, a favorite knickknack, anything personal.”

DL paused in unwrapping the needles. “How in the world would that help?”

Grace considered before answering. DL was already reluctant to take part as it was. She had to be careful how she presented her request.

“I have access to some special forensics we can use. It needs to be a personal object specific to one of the missing girls, one she would have used on a regular basis.”

DL was silent as he restarted his prep work.

“Okay, Grace. I’ll have to trust you on this. Stopping this guy is more important than anything I have against cops or my questions about how you’re working the case. I’ll get what you need.”

“Great,” Grace said, relieved DL wasn’t taking too much persuading.

“Now hold still, and try to relax. The first thing I’m doing is the outline, and it has to go in deep. That will be the roughest part; the rest will be easy.”

Grace took a deep breath and tried not to focus on the sensation of the needle as DL drew the tattoo. She turned her mind instead on how she would explain her abilities to DL when next they met on the case.

## Chapter 13

The doorbell rang not long after Grace got back from DL's. She walked to the door, minimizing the movement in her shoulder. DL told her the tattoo site would be sore for several days and to expect swelling. But it came out looking great, and she was happy to suffer a few days of discomfort for it.

Grace opened the door to find Sophie on the doorstep.

She held up a folded piece of paper. "I got the answer."

"Answer?" Grace asked.

"To your request," Sophie said while glancing around her.

"Okay, Miss Cloak-and-Dagger, come on in." Grace motioned Sophie into the house.

She slipped into the hallway, her body language remaining tight, even after Grace closed the door.

"So, what was the answer?" Grace asked, holding out her hand for the note.

Sophie held the note to her chest, drawing in a deep breath and then releasing it. "I'm not sure you should go to this meeting, Grace."

"You came over here with the note just to tell me that?"

Sophie scrubbed the side of her face. "I've been going back and forth about it since I heard from Anthony that you could meet with Nicco. I thought I had decided to give you the information until just now."

"Sophie, come on. You said this is my chance to connect with someone in your world who might be willing and able to give me the answers I need. Why are you changing your mind?"

"I'm worried about how the meeting will go."

"Why would you be worried? Aren't I just having a conversation?"

"This would be more than just a conversation. It would be an

introduction into the Paranorm world. If you went to this meeting, you would need to be careful.”

“What do you mean, ‘be careful’?”

“Be careful of what you say and how you act—show respect. Nicco is a powerful man in our world. Putting you in front of him means taking a risk you might upset him or put yourself on his bad side.”

“You make it sound as if I should be afraid of him.”

“This is serious, Grace,” Sophie said. “In our world, Nicco’s word is the law. If he doesn’t like what you’re doing, he can make sure you stop doing it, for good.”

“Are you saying I can get myself killed if things don’t go well?”

“No, no, I’m not saying that,” Sophie said. “But they have means of getting Paranorms to do what they want.”

“They? I thought we were only talking about Nicco, here.”

“Nicco and his Family,” Sophie corrected. “They can permanently block a Paranorm’s power if one becomes a problem. It’s worse than death for most Paranorms, never being able to use their gifts again for the rest of their lives. Paranorm families ostracize anyone who undergoes the *schiaiviti del potere*, and many who experience it commit suicide afterward.”

Grace stopped in the middle of forming her next question when it sunk in what Sophie was saying. If it didn’t go well with Nicco, he might cut her off from her new abilities. A part of her felt relief at the idea of not having to keep control over her abilities at all times. But a gut level fear replaced that elation when she realized what it meant for her and Danny. She wouldn’t be able to see him or speak with him. It would be like having him die all over again.

“So the choice is to not go to the meeting and stay ignorant of what’s happening with me? Or to go to the meeting and risk having it go all to hell? Is this the only way? It has to be Nicco, no one else?”

“I’m sorry, Grace, but this is how you can officially enter our world



and find out what you need to learn.” Regret colored Sophie’s voice. “I can’t get you a meeting with the head of The Family, but Nicco is one of the most powerful members of The Family and can help you. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes! I need to move forward and stop living blind about all this. I need answers for us... and to understand how to use my abilities to make a difference. It’s a done deal.”

Sophie looked like she wanted to argue more but shook her head and held out the note.

Grace unfolded it and read the name and address written there. The time penciled in below was for the next morning at eleven a.m.

“This Nicco is the guy?” she asked.

“He is. My cousin Anthony works for him at the theater. He got a meeting for you.”

“Tomorrow morning?” Grace mentally checked her schedule and confirmed she was available.

“Mondays are their off days. It was the best time to meet with Nicco,” Sophie explained. “Can you make it? It wouldn’t be wise to get the appointment and then not be there.”

“I can be there. And thank you for doing this. I know it wasn’t easy for you and put you at risk. Thank you from both me and Danny.”

“Okay,” Sophie accepted. “Anthony will be there tomorrow to do the introductions. They’re old fashioned in that way.”

Grace stifled a groan. She had seen Sophie’s drop-dead gorgeous cousin around the community on occasion. Walking around with his nose in the air and a new boy toy following and hanging on his every word. Grace didn’t object to the boy toys, only Anthony’s arrogant attitude toward them and everyone else. She consoled herself that his role was a minor, temporary inconvenience. He’d do the “introductions,” then she would get answers from Nicco on her own.

“Right.” Grace nodded. “I’ll meet Anthony at the theater at eleven tomorrow.”

“And Grace,” Sophie said, turning to leave. “When I said be careful with what you say, I meant don’t tell Nicco too much, especially about Danny and his ability to be real.”

“You didn’t tell anyone about Danny?” Grace asked, surprised.

“The only thing I shared is you are a new Paranorm who can see and talk to ghosts. Nothing about Danny and definitely nothing about your ability to bring him into the world physically. And I won’t say anything to anyone about it either.” Sophie’s gaze was fierce. “You’re my friend, and Danny is like a younger brother. I may need to tell them about your clairvoyant abilities to get you recognized as a Paranorm, but I will *not* do anything to put Danny in danger.”

The vehemence in Sophie’s voice took Grace aback. She hadn’t considered Sophie’s fondness for Danny in all this. Nor the position it put her in to be aware Danny was a ghost and around still. It wasn’t anything she anticipated when she agreed to share Danny’s situation. Grace hoped this wouldn’t lead to trouble for Sophie down the road.

“Is this something Nicco might use to control me?”

“Control you—yes, but also control Danny. Maybe harm him. I don’t know what they could or would do. But I’d rather you not take a chance,” Sophie said, grasping Grace’s arm.

Grace laid her hand on top of Sophie’s and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“Don’t worry. I’ll do everything in my power to make sure Danny stays a secret and out of harm’s way.”

Sophie nodded. “I know you’ll do fine. You thrive under pressure. Keep your cool and watch what you say, and you’ll be okay. Good luck on getting those answers. I wish I could do more for you, but this is the only way forward.”

“No, you’ve done more than enough. It’s time for me to do my part.”

Sophie gave Grace a quick hug and left the house. Grace finished shutting the door as Danny appeared next to her.

*“What’s that?”* He pointed to the note she held.

*“The information for my appointment with Sophie’s contact.”*

*“Was she here?”*

*“Yeah, you just missed her.”*

*“Shoot! I should’ve come back earlier.”*

*“She didn’t have time to stay and chat. She was only stopping by to give me the information on the meeting,”* Grace clarified.

*“Oh, okay. When is it?”*

*“Tomorrow morning.”*

*“Great! I can’t wait to meet more Paranorms!”*

*“I’m going to this meeting on my own, Danny.”*

*“By yourself? No way! I’m going with you.”*

*“You think it would be exciting to meet other Paranorms, but it’s too dangerous for you to be there with me.”*

*“Why would it be dangerous?”*

*“We can’t trust other Paranorms will be as welcoming and helpful as Sophie. Sophie knew us before I became a Paranorm and you became a ghost. We have a relationship with her that goes beyond the supernatural aspect of our lives. We won’t have that with other Paranorms. This guy, Nicco, sounds like someone we don’t want knowing our secrets.”* Grace kept her eyes locked with Danny’s.

*“We’re better off having you work with the professors to learn more about mind controlling abilities than exposing you to anything at the meeting. There are too many unknowns with these people, and I’m not willing to put you at risk. Period.”*

Danny seemed to struggle with what she said. But his critical thinking soon came to the forefront as it always did when faced with a problem.

*“Okay, Gracie,” Danny agreed. “Just be careful, and take care of yourself for me.”*

*“I plan on doing exactly that.”*

## Chapter 14

Grace sat in her car, examining the Dayan Springs theater building, preparing mentally for the encounter. She ran over in her mind the little bit she knew about Paranorms. Sophie and Anthony were the only true Paranorms she had experience with, and she couldn't be sure they were representative of Paranorms in general.

And then there was the whole issue of Nicco himself. Sophie was only willing to tell her that Nicco and his Family were not Paranorms. They were not part of Sophie's family but a powerful group who controlled the Paranorms in the city. Bottom line, he was a complete unknown.

*Okay, Grace. No pressure here, only a simple conversation that will most likely change the course of your life! Breathe and stay in control of yourself.*

She took a deep breath and got out of the car, seating her Glock in the holster at the back of her waist out of habit as she did so. Anthony was not the type to wait, so she pulled on one of the ornate wooden doors, and it opened to reveal a dark entranceway. Creeping into the building, she let the door close with a soft thump behind her while waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dim light.

Once she could see again, the first thing Grace noticed was a long corridor covered with framed show posters on the walls. At the end of the hall was a massive man sitting on a stool, large muscular arms crossed and dark eyes focused on her. His close-cropped gray hair emphasized his solid jaw and thick lips set in a grim expression. She traversed the distance between them, working to meet his eyes the whole way and not let the colorful posters distract her.

Stopping in front of the man she assumed was a bouncer by his size and location in the theater, she waited while he eyed her up and down, his

bland expression not changing in the slightest. She gritted her teeth to keep from making a smart comment in response to the appraisal, reminding herself this was all part of her first impression with these people. She would need to assume everyone was taking part in the “evaluation” of her this morning as a Paranorm.

“Good morning,” Grace said, trying to sound amiable. “I have an appointment with Nicco. Anthony is supposed to meet me and provide an introduction.”

She offered the note from Sophie, hoping it would speed along the process. The man raised his beefy hand to take the note. He opened it and glanced at the contents before handing it back. He stood and turned away from her to open a side door nestled in the wall, walking through it without saying a word.

Grace jumped to follow him, shaking her head at the lack of hospitality displayed to this point. *And the game begins.*

But the bouncer’s thick arm stopped her right after she entered the next room, barring further progress.

She was standing in a large open space with a small bar along one wall. There were sofas and comfortable chairs scattered throughout the space and a giant LCD TV mounted on one wall. In the middle of the room, there was a table with several people sitting around it.

The bouncer waved his hand at her, then pointed to a metal detector standing right inside the door.

*Curious.* Grace prepared to walk through the device. “I have a plate in my leg,” she warned the bouncer. “I’ll set this thing off.”

He nodded and held out a small basket.

“Keys and cell phone?”

He nodded again and pointed to her necklace.

“Are you kidding? I told you I have a plate in my leg, and you’re worried about my jewelry setting off the detector?”

The bouncer gave her a reproachful look and motioned with his hand for her to drop the items into the basket.

*Mouth, Grace. You aren't here five minutes, and you're already making a great first impression.* With deliberate slowness, she removed her necklace and watch and placed them and her phone and keys in the basket.

The bouncer set the basket on a nearby side table and leaned over to grab a hand wand from the side of the detector. He ran it over Grace's body, paying particular attention to both of Grace's legs, the right leg setting off the wand as it passed over the metal plate. He grunted as it beeped but made no other comment.

He continued to scan her until the wand let out a series of loud beeps when he reached her waist.

"Oops," she said as she reached back to grab the Glock.

Faster than she could follow, a bulky hand reached out to grasp her forearm in a vice-like grip.

"Hey!" Grace said, looking over her shoulder to meet the bouncer's angry glare.

Grace stilled herself under his stare while the man reached into the back of her waist to remove the Glock. He held up the gun in front of her face, shaking his head somberly.

"Sorry, force of habit," Grace said. "Professional hazard."

He continued to stare at her, his eyebrows raised.

*Way to build trust from the get-go, Grace.*

"That's the only one, I promise."

The bouncer tucked the Glock into his pants and then began sweeping the rest of her with the wand. He grunted one more time after finding no other weapons. Once he finished, he returned the hand wand to the detector and picked up the basket with her items. Then he turned and strode further into the room, carrying the basket with him.

"My stuff?" she called after him, once again hurrying to follow.

He ignored her and kept walking toward the table.

*Dammit, not cool!*

As they approached, Anthony rose to meet them several feet away from the table and its occupants. “Thank you, Samuel.”

The bouncer handed Anthony the basket and turned and walked back the way they came. Anthony shifted his gaze to Grace.

*Looking as haughty as usual.* One personality she could handle without concern.

Anthony wore a deep gray suit that complimented his dark Italian coloring. The suit must cost more than Grace’s entire monthly salary as a security guard. On a normal day, his movie-star looks would dazzle, but right now, an ugly expression marred them.

“Good morning, Anthony,” she said in her most polite voice, careful to keep her distaste from showing. Ironic that the first words she had ever exchanged with him would be at this moment.

“Good day, Miss Bishop,” Anthony returned the greeting, but Grace had a feeling he meant it more as a goodbye than a hello. “Sophie has instructed you on the nature of this meeting?” he asked her, looking down his nose at her.

*More or less.* “Yes, Sophie informed me Nicco has graciously agreed to meet with me today.”

Anthony raised an eyebrow at her. But he appeared to take her statement at face value. “I will give you an introduction, and then you will receive five minutes of his time.”

“Five minutes!” Grace whispered, trying not to raise her voice despite her frustration.

“I suggest you keep your tone civil, Miss Bishop. Five minutes is more than an *Aperto Rotto* deserves,” he whispered back, the venom strong in his voice and his face a mask of disgust.

*What the hell?* Anthony was a smug and sometimes sullen ass, but



she hadn't realized he would be an adversary today. Things were not getting off to a stellar start at all.

*And what in the blue blazes is an 'Aperto Rotto'? Definitely looking that one up when I get my cell back.*

"In fact, considering your disrespectful attitude, I am sure you would just be wasting Nicco's time," Anthony said as he held out the basket of her things.

Working hard to keep her voice even and emotionless, Grace said, "I'm sorry if I came across as anything but appreciative, Anthony. I am grateful to you for setting up the meeting for me on Sophie's behalf. She thought it was important for me to meet Nicco."

Anthony loomed over her, eyebrows squeezed together, appraising her.

"If Sophie was not my dear cousin, rest assured you would not be getting one second of Nicco's time. You are lucky Nicco will give you any time at all."

With one more piercing look, Anthony composed himself and turned to lead her to the table. While they were conversing, the rest of the occupants of the table had dispersed, and one man remained sitting nonchalantly waiting for them.

*This must be the infamous Nicco.* Grace attempted to approach the table with a calm exterior.

Anthony motioned to her with a dramatic flair of the hand and announced "Miss Bishop, an acquaintance of my cousin, Sophie. Miss Bishop, this is Nicco." With that, Anthony bowed, placed the basket on the table next to Nicco, and moved to stand at Nicco's side.

*That's the old fashion introduction?* She congratulated herself for not rolling her eyes at Anthony. Given the formality of his presentation and Sophie's warnings, Grace remained standing and waited for Nicco to speak first. The silence stretched on for several seconds, and Grace focused on

breathing and not fidgeting while she waited.

She studied Nicco as studied her. He was lithe in build, but his muscles were taut under the tasteful, slate-gray, silk shirt he wore. He had dark black hair, kept in a tight cut, with a matching goatee with a bit of white. His eyes were a startling sapphire blue, full of intelligence.

Nicco wore a large signet ring on his left hand, although she couldn't tell what the image was on its face, only something with wings. He had earrings, lots of them. In his left ear was a large, blue sapphire matching his eyes. In his right ear were a series of small gemstones running from his earlobe to the top of the outer ear. They spanned the full spectrum of the rainbow and then some, nine in all: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, black, and white.

Nicco had a confident and powerful air about him, like a man used to being in control, who expected everyone would follow his will without question. He didn't have Anthony's Hollywood looks, but he was attractive. Majorly attractive.

*Focus, Grace, focus. Remember, Sophie said this man is dangerous.*

Nicco finally spoke, and his voice was a rich baritone, carrying a hint of an accent Grace couldn't place.

“Good morning, *mio caro*. How may I be of service to you?”

*Didn't ask me to sit down. He must either be trying to keep me uncomfortable, or he's playing a power game, or both. Maybe he doesn't see the point to extending the invitation since I only get five minutes with him.*

Five minutes wouldn't be enough time to get answers for her questions about her abilities. She should skip those. She would need to go straight to the questions about the man attacking the girls if she was going to get anything useful from her time with Nicco.

“There are girls disappearing,” she said, aware Nicco began to lose interest as soon as she finished her first sentence. “A man is mesmerizing them to abduct them.”

Nicco's attention refocused on her at the mention of the man. "How do you know this man is out there?"

Trying not to come across as defensive, Grace replied, "I've talked to a girl who escaped from him. She told me what happened to her."

Nicco waved his hand, dismissing Beth's testimony. "Norms imagine things all the time. They lie about things to cover their own errors and misdeeds. This man is a figment of her imagination."

Grace's face grew hot at his callous dismissal of Beth's terrifying ordeal and disfigurement.

*Norms? I feel like I should be insulted, but I'm not in the Norm category anymore. Not a recognized Paranorm, but not in the Norm camp either.*

"He's not a figment of her imagination."

"Reeaaally?" Nicco asked.

"Yes, really," Grace forced her voice to be steady. She would not back down.

"And how would you know this?" Nicco asked, impatience filling his voice.

"Because I read her and saw it for myself."

Nicco stared at her in stony silence, his eyes growing colder. Without shifting his attention from Grace, Nicco asked, "Anthony, did Sophie not say Miss Bishop was a clairvoyant who sees and talks with ghosts—not someone with psychometry abilities?"

"Yes, that is what Sophie told me," Anthony replied, a sneer dominating his face.

Nicco continued to stare daggers at her.

"Miss Bishop, Sophie overstepped herself to speak to you about Paranorms and The Family. I was prepared to be lenient with her, given she had discovered you were an *Aperto Rotto* and she wanted to bring you to The Family. However, I will have to reconsider my position on Sophie's

indiscretion.”

Not waiting for Grace to respond, Nicco continued. “*Mio caro*, I did not realize when you requested this appointment you would come here and waste my time with fantastical tales.”

“I don’t understand what you mean. I’m telling you the truth. I read it from the survivor, and I know what this man can do. I came here hoping you would give me information to help stop him.”

“*Mio caro*, you may have convinced yourself what you say is true, but it is not possible.”

Grace moved from confusion to anger.

“How is it ‘not possible’? I did the reading a few nights ago.” She lost all concern about making a positive impression. *They don’t believe me?*

Anthony snorted. “Of course it is not possible. Sophie already told Nicco you are a clairvoyant who communicates with ghosts. There is no way you can also be a ‘reader,’ as you colloquially put it.”

Grace wanted to wipe that smug expression off Anthony’s know-it-all face. “And why is it impossible?”

Anthony spoke again, his voice taking on a superior air. “Because Paranorms, even *Aperto Rottos*, cannot have more than one ability. It does not happen.”

Nicco made a tsking sound, and Anthony stopped what he was going to say next.

*Shit!* There went following Sophie’s advice about not sharing too much... or antagonizing Nicco. How was she supposed to know Paranorms didn’t have multiple abilities? That wasn’t what she was experiencing for herself, at all.

“Well, I guess there’s a first time for everything,” Grace said.

“*Mio caro*, you are convinced you are both a clairvoyant and a capable of psychometry?”

“Yes, I am,” she replied without hesitation.

“Then prove it.”

## Chapter 15

Grace sat in stunned silence for a moment, trying to regain her composure. This day was turning out to be even more surreal than she imagined. She was beginning to identify herself as a Paranorm, now that she knew they existed. But here she was in front of the man who was the power behind the hidden society, and she couldn't convince him she was one of them.

"Fine," she said, letting her full irritation show. "How do you propose I do that? My abilities do not include pulling ghosts out of thin air."

Grace thought she saw the side of Nicco's mouth twitch in amusement, but the motion was too fleeting to be sure.

"Not to worry, *mio caro*. We can provide tests for both your supposed clairvoyant and psychometrist abilities," Nicco assured her, the skepticism clear in his tone. "We will begin with the clairvoyant ability first, since you brought it up yourself."

*Okay, bring it on!* She had the abilities. She was more than ready to prove to the lot of them she met the requirements to be included in their group, organization, family, or club. Whatever the hell they considered themselves. She needed to get past their disbelief in her abilities if she was ever going to get help for herself and for DL's girls.

"I accept," she said, presenting it as if she had a choice in the matter.

This time Nicco smiled. But it was a nasty one that didn't reach his eyes.

"Gabriella," he called, motioning over his shoulder for her to approach the table. "There is a guest who wishes to speak with you."

Grace waited in nervous anticipation, peering over Nicco's shoulder in an attempt to catch a glimpse of Gabriella as she approached. She hoped this ghost at least had all her body parts and wasn't frozen in some horrible

visage of her death experience. Grace had seen some horrific wraiths since her abilities surfaced, particularly at the hospital.

Grace was surprised when a figure glided past Nicco, growing more distinct the closer she came. She was a beautiful middle-aged woman of classic features, in a flowing blue dress that covered her from neck to ankles. But the dress left no doubt about the full and supple form beneath the fabric. She carried herself with grace and poise, and the word “classy” jumped to Grace’s mind.

Grace felt intimidated.

Gabriella stopped next to her chair and looked down on her with a warm smile. Somewhat reassured, Grace greeted Gabriella with her best manners, as her carriage indicated she deserved. “*Good morning, Gabriella, I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.*”

Gabriella’s laugh was light and delighted.

“*Good morning, child,*” she responded with a delicate nod of her head. “*It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, as well.*”

Grace relaxed and smiled shyly.

“*My name is Grace Bishop, and I came here to get help from Nicco. But it appears he doesn’t trust I am what I claim to be. I’m sorry to disturb you with this, but he wants me to prove I’m clairvoyant by speaking with you.*”

Gabriella turned her head to give Nicco a long look and then returned her gaze to Grace. Nicco appeared oblivious to their exchange and was sitting like he was after calling Gabriella to join them.

Gabriella studied Grace with intense eyes for a few moments, her head tilting from side to side.

“*Ah yes, I can see how you would pose a challenge to him, my little Aperto Rotto. He was not expecting you.*”

Grace sighed. She was getting annoyed at being left in the dark on what this whole *Aperto Rotto* business was about.

*“I’m sorry, but what is an Aperto Rotto? Everyone keeps calling me that, as if I am supposed to understand what it means.”*

*“It means ‘broken open,’ and once you prove yourself to Nicco, he will explain what it means. But let’s not focus on that, my dear. This conversation needs to be quick and to the point. Then you can move on with getting the answers you need.”*

Grace fought down her instinct to object. Everyone here was focused on keeping her away from particular topics. But at least Gabriella acknowledged Grace had a legitimate reason for being there.

*“Okay, then. Since this is to be a test of my clairvoyant abilities, can you tell me something only you would know, to prove to Nicco we had a conversation?”*

*“Excellent, my dear. Now you are focused on the task at hand. Tell Nicco he should have given the Marley Horse a carrot while he was visiting there.”*

*“A carrot?”*

*“Yes dear, a carrot.”*

*“It will be enough to prove I spoke with you?”*

*“Don’t worry, my dear. It will be more than enough.”* Gabriella gave another delighted laugh. *“And tell him my advice is to stop sleeping and start seeing.”*

*“Okay, I will.”* Asking for further clarification on Gabriella’s obtuse statements wouldn’t earn her answers.

*“And my advice to you, little one, is this. Keep the boy safe—he is key for what is to come.”*

Grace’s heart froze in her chest. Danny. Gabriella was talking about Danny! All her confidence in having kept Danny safe by leaving him at home drained out of her in a flash.

*“He is not known here, except by me,”* Gabriella assured her. *“Your secret is yours to keep, not mine to tell.”*



Grace searched Gabriella's face, needing to see the honesty there. Gods, someone else she would need to trust to keep Danny a secret.

Gabriella met her gaze without hesitation, and Grace saw only warmth and sincerity in her eyes.

*"I will. With all my heart, I will,"* Grace promised.

Gabriella bent down to graze the side of Grace's cheek with a soft kiss. *"Best of luck, my Raven Knight. Hold true, be bold, but in all things, be yourself."*

Grace shook her head. There was nothing this woman did not see or know about her. Luckily, for some reason, she seemed to be on Grace's side. For that, she was grateful. Someone in the room believed in her and wanted her to succeed. Danny was still safe, and she had a way to prove she was clairvoyant.

*"Thank you, Gabriella. I appreciate your help and advice. Will I get a chance to see you again?"*

*"As they say, time will be the judge. But I think yes. I hope yes."* She began to fade from Grace's side.

Grace watched until Gabriella dissolved from view, somewhat sad at her parting but buoyed by her warm nature and supportive advice.

Turning to face Nicco, she announced, "Gabriella wanted me to share two things with you. She didn't explain what either one meant, but she said they would be enough to prove I'm clairvoyant."

Nicco nodded for her to continue.

"First thing is this. She said, 'tell Nicco he should have given the Marley Horse a carrot while he was visiting there'."

Nicco surprised her by responding to the statement with a genuine, deep laugh.

"Ah, Gabriella." He shook his head. "And the second thing?" he asked, still smiling.

"She said to give you this piece of advice, 'to stop sleeping and start

seeing’.”

“That is all she said? ‘Stop sleeping and start seeing?’”

“Yes. That was all.” *All she said to share with you.*

“Very well then. You have established you are a clairvoyant, as Sophie said.”

Grace was happy she had vindicated Sophie’s support on her first ability.

“Now for the test for your supposed second ability,” Nicco challenged.

## Chapter 16

*So much for a breather.* Grace groaned, mentally preparing herself for the next round of testing. Her ability with ghosts came without effort. She could see ghosts and have conversations with them as if they were living people. But her reading ability was trickier.

Reading wasn't always guaranteed to be successful or clear, and it depended on how she tried to do it. Reading a person by touch was the best, most reliable, way to use her ability. She could also read objects, but they rarely revealed much about the owner or their most recent use. Sometimes she could get a strong clear image from the object, and other times it was only a vague impression.

She hoped whatever test Nicco had for her, her ability would prove strong enough to convince him she was special in having two abilities.

"I am ready for the next test," she offered, again working to maintain the fiction she was the one directing the events of the morning.

Nicco ignored her acknowledgment, motioning for Anthony to approach the table. He walked up and laid a cloth-wrapped object in front of her.

"What do you want me to find out from this?" She gestured to the object without unfolding the cloth covering.

"I offer no suggestions. Tell me what you read," Nicco ordered.

Grace took a deep breath, looking over the indistinct form under the cloth.

*Here goes nothing!* She lifted the folds away until they revealed an object. It was a dagger with a blade and cross guard. Something you would expect to see in a museum.

Grace's heart sank. The older the object, the more difficult it was to read impressions from it. Objects lost those impressions over time like water

draining out of a poorly stoppered bathtub. This was feeling like a set-up. Nicco must know readings were more challenging on older objects and gave her something she would have difficulty reading.

She raised her eyes to glare at him, gritting her teeth not to say anything. He sat back, resting his elbows on the arms of the chair and interlacing his fingers.

She needed to channel the frustration, use it as energy to get a reading. As she reached out to touch the dagger, she noticed something else. There was a definite rusty tint to the blade. It looked like Nicco had given her a bloodied dagger, and he was expecting her to tell him how it got that way.

Pushing on with it, Grace picked the dagger up with her right hand. She visualized a dark material sliding away from her fingers to her palm and up her arm, leaving her hand in direct contact with the hilt. At once, she heard a high-pitched scream and felt a wave of intense pain sweep up her arm. The pain was overwhelming, and she doubled over, the dagger falling out of her rigid hand, back onto the table with a clatter.

Grace clutched herself, crouching over to rest her head on the table, willing the pain to recede. Instead, her stomach revolted at the combination of the reading's sound and pain. Before she knew it, she found herself on her feet rushing to the bathroom she had noted in the back of the room.

Anthony's taunting laughter followed her into the bathroom. But it didn't affect her as she was too intent on making it into a stall and to a toilet. Dropping to her knees, she swept her hair from her face before a bout of intense and repeated vomiting began. Finally, she had emptied her stomach and only gastric juice was coming up.

Feeling shaky, she flushed the toilet and grabbed a handful from the roll of toilet paper to scrub her face and lips. Tossing the used paper into the toilet, she spit in it a few times to clear out her mouth. Still a bit weak, she flushed one more time and turned to make her way out of the stall, using the walls to keep herself upright.

She crept to the sink, splashed cold water on her face, and leaned on her elbows while examining her pale, drawn face.

*Shit, shit, shit!*

Death was always the worst thing to read. She had read a number of objects of people who were dead, but this was the first time she read something that involved a murder.

*Get it together, Grace.*

From the moment she arrived, everyone had worked to take her out of her comfort zone and to set her up to fail. She managed to get through the test with Gabriella and appeared to have found an ally there. She would *not* let Nicco defeat her with this test.

What did her intuition tell her about this reading? Mentally getting a tight hold on her stomach, she replayed the reading in her head, reliving the sound of the scream and, with effort, blocking the intensity of the pain. What had she missed on the first viewing? What smells, visual information, or sensations other than pain?

She slowed her breathing and opened to the vision one more time. There was something about the tenor of the scream that kept trying to get her attention. High pitched, almost human. *That's it!*

She went once with her parents to a working farm. It was in the fall, when they were harvesting the crops and preparing for winter. Her parents wanted her to get a full experience of farm life. They decided she needed to see the warm fuzzy elements, like plucky chickens in the barnyard, as well as the harsh realities of animal slaughtering. She would never forget the squeals the hogs made that day. That was what she heard in her reading. A hog being slaughtered.

She gripped the edge of the sink with both hands.

*Fucking bastard! Fucking, fucking bastard! Sneaky, Nicco, but not sneaky enough!*

With determination, she pushed herself up to standing. Noticing a

small bottle of mouthwash next to the sink, she took a swig and swished and gargled with it before spitting into the sink. She wiped her hands on the soft hand towel nearby and strode through the bathroom door.

She returned to the table to find Nicco still sitting in the same nonchalant way. Anthony was standing next to him with a hateful satisfied look on his face.

“Are you done with the reading, *mio caro*?” Nicco asked, as if she had not rushed from the room to lose her breakfast.

Grace fought off her embarrassment. “Not yet.”

As Nicco raised his eyebrows, she reached out once more to touch the dagger. This time, knowing what was coming, she moved past the scream and blocked the pain to see the scene unfold in her mind.

It was a wooded glen. A man’s hand was holding the dagger as he sliced open the throat of a large boar felled by a spear and several arrows in its flanks. The screams cut off as the blood gushed from its throat, mouth, and nose.

Grace removed her hand and visualized the dark material sliding back down her wrist and hand, ending her connection to dagger.

“I can’t tell you when it happened, but this dagger was used to cut the throat of a wild boar. I think it was hunted in a forest. The man carrying this dagger used it to kill the boar.”

Anthony’s face shifted from smug amusement to surprise, and he turned to face Nicco. “A boar—?”

Nicco raised a single finger in the air to silence him. “Very intriguing, *mio caro*, very intriguing indeed. It appears you were being truthful when you claimed you had more than one ability.”

Nicco grew quiet. Grace sensed he was seeing her for the first time since she arrived and was appraising her seriously.

*Okay, I’ve got his attention finally, but is that a good thing or a bad thing?* Either way, she had at least established herself as a true Paranorm.

“Does this mean you’ll answer my questions now?” she asked, following Gabriella’s advice.

Nicco studied her for a few more moments, long enough for Grace to feel the need to fidget under his stare. All at once, he rose from the table.

“Anthony will assist you with the disappearing girls. Good day, Miss Bishop.” With that, he stood and stalked away before either Anthony or Grace could respond.

Anthony gathered himself together as Nicco disappeared through a doorway, then faced Grace and asked her gruffly, “How may I be of assistance, Miss Bishop?”

*He must hate this.* She bit back a smile. “How about we start with you calling me Grace instead of Miss Bishop?”

Anthony did not look pleased by her suggestion but nodded his agreement. “Where do you wish to begin, Grace?”

Exhausted from the stress of the meeting and the tests of the day, she considered how to proceed. If Nicco put Anthony at her disposal, there was no need to get all her answers from him today, not while she was too tired to think straight. Not while they were in his territory. Better to wait until she was ready to engage with him in her own territory.

“I’m meeting with some people at my place on Thursday to discuss the case. Can you be there in the evening around eight p.m. to help us?”

“I don’t have a show that night. Yes, I can.”

“Great. If you don’t mind, I’d like to get my stuff back so I can leave, now.”

Anthony had the decency to look sheepish as he handed the basket with Grace’s things over to her. She put on her jewelry and gathered up her keys and cell phone.

“I’ll see you Thursday, then,” she said in parting.

“Yes, you will,” Anthony responded before hurrying from her presence, heading in the direction Nicco had gone.

Grace strode across the room to where Samuel was sitting. Without a word, he pulled her Glock from his waistband and handed it to her. She waved cheekily at him in thanks and strode out the door to her car. She could hardly wait to get home and update Danny on how the morning had gone and see what he could find out about *Aperto Rottos*.



## Chapter 17

Nicco sat in his spacious office in a plush leather chair. He knew it wouldn't take long until Anthony came to find him there, not after the way he left the situation with Miss Bishop. He was looking forward to the upcoming conversation—it was long overdue.

Anthony came through the open door. “Working with an *Aperto Rottos*—”

“Shut the door,” Nicco said, interrupting him.

Anthony started at the tone in Nicco's voice and did what he was told. He approached Nicco's desk, frowning and running his hand through his hair.

“Sit down.” Nicco pointed one finger at the chair on the opposite side of his desk.

Anthony took his seat, and this time made no attempt to speak.

Nicco gazed at the boy across from him. “How old are you, Anthony?”

He looked at Nicco with narrowed eyes before answering. “Twenty-four.”

“And how long have you been working here at the theater?”

“Since I turned eighteen. And I have been the star attraction since I was twenty-one,” he added with a smug expression.

Nicco frowned at the pride with which Anthony made the statement. He met Anthony's eyes squarely before commenting.

“I can only blame myself for how much your ego has grown since you joined us here. It is obvious you are very proud of your standing amongst the Paranoms at the theater and your perceived position as my favorite.”

Anthony sank down into his chair at Nicco's words, his bravado replaced by a reddened face as he shrank into the cushioned back.

“It was convenient for me to let your growing vanity go unchecked. It motivated you to take on tasks and responsibilities at the theater I was weary of dealing with on a regular basis. But the appearance of Miss Bishop changed things today.”

Anthony hunched his shoulders and dropped his gaze to the floor, refusing to meet Nicco’s eyes under the continued criticism.

Nicco let silence hang in the room, waiting to see what effect it would have on Anthony and giving time for his emotions to bubble up. The direction the boy’s attitude went would give Nicco insight into the course of the conversation he would need to have with him.

After some time, Anthony broke the silence, his voice trembling with intensity. “You will make me work with this *Aperto Rotto, Mio Signore?*”

Nicco smiled to himself at Anthony’s question. In one sentence, the boy both defied and supplicated him, which exemplified both his intelligence and his stubbornness.

“Yes, Anthony, you will help Miss Bishop with her problem.”

“But why, *Mio Signore?* Why would we help an *Aperto Rotto?*” Anthony’s confusion was clear on his face.

“You do not bear the Wings, and yet you dare to question me?”

Anthony recoiled in fear and then froze.

Nicco sighed. The Paranorms’ fear of *Aperto Rottos* was well founded. The Family helped to instill that fear and maintain it as a precaution against the exposure of their world. It would be better to talk to the boy rather than intimidate him.

“Anthony, why do you despise the *Aperto Rottos?*” Nicco asked in a milder tone.

“Because they are not true Paranorms, only broken ones,” Anthony declared.

“And the Norms?” Nicco countered. “Do you hate them as well?”

“The Norms are dull animals, but the *Aperto Rottos* are true abominations!”

Nicco had not realized the vehemence of the boy’s derision. He rebuked himself for not paying closer attention to Anthony’s attitude. This perspective would only lead to risks down the road for The Family and the Paranorms.

“You see the *Aperto Rottos* as monsters, like the one in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*?” Nicco suggested.

“Yes, of course.”

“Why?” Nicco let the question hang in the air.

“Because we always—”

Nicco interrupted him. “No, tell me why *you* feel this way, not what Marcella and the rest of your family told you.”

After a pause, Anthony said “Because they are uncontrolled, untrained, and have no loyalty to the Paranorms or The Family.”

“And you know this from personal experience? From meeting *Aperto Rottos* and seeing what they can do?” Nicco challenged.

Anthony hesitated. “No. I never met an *Aperto Rotto* in person before today, but everyone knows how dangerous they are to us.”

“Uncontrolled and untrained, yet today Miss Bishop read Sergey’s dagger with more precision than you yourself ever did.”

*With more precision than anyone but those with the strongest psychometry ever had.*

Anthony had the decency to look embarrassed.

“Why do you think Miss Bishop came to us today?”

“According to what she said this evening, she wants help to find and stop someone preying on Norm girls.”

“An *Aperto Rotto*, who Sophie says only found out about the Paranorm world a few days ago, comes to us seeking help for Norms unable to protect themselves. She faces an unknown situation out of loyalty to a

friend at what she can only perceive as great risk to herself.”

Anthony refused to comment.

“This *Aperto Rotto* lost both her parents three years ago. She was raising her younger brother by herself until he died in a car accident which almost killed her. Then she discovers she has abilities beyond rational explanation.”

Anthony started to interject, but Nicco raised his hand to keep him quiet. “Have you ever thought about what it must be like for *Aperto Rottos*? How an accident releases powers they do not understand or have a context for? With no family of Paranorms to explain their gifts to them or guide them on how to use those gifts? To explain the tenets Paranorms must live by to survive in the world of Norms, or how to support and be loyal to The Family? All these things have been available to you since birth, but none of it has been available to someone like Miss Bishop.”

It pleased Nicco that Anthony was listening to what he was saying. He hoped it was not because Anthony was preparing counter arguments but was absorbing what he was trying to impart.

“What would be a clairvoyant’s first experience with a ghost in your family?”

Anthony hesitated before saying, “Another family member who stayed on as a ghost to train new clairvoyants.”

“Yes, a relative who would manage the first encounter for the clairvoyant at a certain age. Someone who would always be available as a mentor as the child grew into their ability. And what about Miss Bishop? What was her first experience with her gift, her first experience with seeing ghosts?”

“I don’t know,” Anthony admitted.

“Her abilities came to her in the hospital. You know we station Paranorms there in various positions to keep an eye out for newly ‘born’ *Aperto Rottos*, and they identified her right away.

“Can you imagine being besieged by ghosts who suffered sickness and pain and death and aren’t aware of their situations? All attracted to, and wanting something from, a clairvoyant *Aperto Rotto*? And Miss Bishop, newly gifted, with no understanding or control of her ability.

“That is why most of the *Aperto Rottos* are institutionalized or commit suicide. They cannot take their situation. They cannot manage their abilities and either go mad or find a permanent way to escape by killing themselves.”

Anthony grew sober at the scenario Nicco was drawing for him.

“But somehow, somehow, Miss Bishop survived. She learned to control her abilities, to understand them, and to use them for a purpose. And to do it well.”

The strength she showed in personality and the power and focus of her “untrained” skills were remarkable. How had she done it? Was it her training as a police officer that allowed her to dissociate from the brutality of what she saw and experienced upon “waking” at the hospital?

There was no family to support her, but were the friends there for her enough? Or was there another reason he was not seeing that helped her survive and to thrive. Helped her gain control over her abilities and still be able to function in the Norms’ world? Nicco forced himself to stop his speculations and to focus on his conversation with Anthony.

“Do you think you would do as well if you were in her position?” Nicco challenged.

It was obvious Anthony was struggling between what he learned about *Aperto Rottos* since childhood and the story Nicco recounted to him for this particular *Aperto Rotto*.

“When you offered my help to Miss Bishop, Grace, what were you expecting me to do?” Anthony inquired after a pause, all arrogance gone from his voice.

Nicco didn’t let his pleasure at Anthony’s question show. “Whatever

you can to help her solve this case, in a way that maintains the tenets and protects our world but stops this man. Consider yourself an ambassador for the Paranorms if you will, one with an opportunity to bridge the gaps you described in the understanding and experience of Miss Bishop. Trust her judgment, but guide her where you can. Until there is a resolution, we will postpone your participation in the show.”

Anthony looked surprised, but satisfied, if not thrilled, with the assignment.

“Do you think you can do that?” Nicco asked.

“Yes, *Mio Signore*. I can do that.”

“And you cannot share with Sophie, Marcella, or anyone else in your family about what happened here today. Nothing, understood?”

Anthony appeared uncomfortable but agreed “Yes, *Mio Signore*.”

“And if Miss Bishop asks more questions about Paranorms or The Family, particularly The Family, tell her she needs to come to me for the answers.”

“Even if she asks questions about The Family’s powers?”

“No, not one word. She has enough to deal with right now—she needs to focus on her case. I have been careful to avoid spell craft in her presence to keep her unaware of my true nature. I will tell her about The Family when the time is right.”

“Yes, *Mio Signore*.”

“Then we are done for today. Take the time between now and Tuesday to get ready for your meeting with Miss Bishop and her friends.”

Without another word, Anthony rose and bowed, then left the room, closing the door behind him.

Nicco settled back once again into his chair.

*Ah, Gabriella, I am trying to follow your advice, although I am sure there is still more for me to “see.” Is your favorite protégé “awake” yet?*

## Chapter 18

Nicco smiled to himself as the air stirred in the room. Gabriella wouldn't hesitate to come to him now that Anthony was gone. He closed his eyes and, with a fingertip, drew the symbols for Second Sight and Second Hearing on the ink blotter on the desk.

Lesser warlocks would have needed to use a more permanent method to draw the symbols, like chalk or pencil, to make the spell work. Nicco was powerful and practiced enough in his will that a cursory drawing sufficed to activate the spells.

He opened his eyes to see Gabriella sitting at ease in the chair Anthony had vacated.

"Welcome, Gabriella. Thank you for your help today."

"That made for an entertaining morning, Little Raven."

Nicco chuckled at her use of the name. She gave it to him long ago, but she would always think of him that way, despite the intervening years.

"I was curious when you asked me to help with the testing. Marcella and her family are normally the ones to deal with the clairvoyant Paranorms, so I expected this would be something special. Something special indeed. An *Aperto Rotto* with *two* abilities! Where did you ever find her?" Gabriella's face glowed with interest.

Nicco grimaced. "V 'asked' me to test her."

"You mean Viora commanded you to determine the extent of the girl's powers," Gabriella said.

"Yes."

"Your sister keeps a sharp eye on what is happening in her domain. What brought her attention to this Grace?"

"V's had this girl watched for a while, now. I believe the tipping point came when Miss Bishop reached out to someone in Marcella's family

and was asking about her ability.”

Nicco tapped his fingers on the desk. “I do not think V is aware the girl has two abilities. I think that is something I will keep to myself for a while.”

Gabriella looked at Nicco, the concern obvious on her face.

“Do you think it is wise to keep things from your sister? Do you want to engage her in these types of games?”

“My half-sister does not need to know anything more than that this girl is a true *Aperto Rotto*,” Nicco growled. “Especially when Grace’s problem might be related to one of V’s damnable pets.”

Gabriella sat waiting, while Nicco’s temper cooled.

“What are you planning to do about Grace, then?” she asked, redirecting the conversation.

“For now, nothing. Anthony will find out what is going on and will keep me informed.”

“You won’t share with Viora that Grace has multiple powers, but you also won’t do anything yourself to help Grace.”

“Help her? What do you expect me to do?”

“Educate her on her powers,” was Gabriella’s exasperated reply.

“Gabriella, a Paranorm is the Paranorms’ problem, even an *Aperto Rotto*. If she needs help with her powers, she should go to Marcella and her family.”

Gabriella gave him a stern look.

“You know full well Marcella will not accept an *Aperto Rotto* into her family. Even with your formal recognition, which you have not given, it will be a challenge to get their family to accept one such as Grace. It is rarely done.”

Nicco kept his face untouched by emotion, not giving Gabriella anything to tell if her arguments were having an impact.

“You are not even willing to mentor her like you do the other



Paranorms here at the theater?” Gabriella asked.

Nicco gave Gabriella a considering look. “What is your interest in the girl, Gabriella? Why push for me to become involved with her?”

“Because for once, after too many years to recall, you are finally interested in something!” Gabriella leaned to the front of her chair.

“You have shown nothing but apathy about your life for too long.” Gabriella eyed him. “I thought this one sparked something in you, but maybe I am wrong.”

“I told you this is something for the Paranorms to deal with. If you are so interested in the girl, you should mentor her yourself.”

Gabriella stood and walked to the edge of the desk, forcing Nicco to look up at her.

“Niccolo Sidotti, you are acting like a stubborn child. I was your mentor for years at your mother’s request. She was my cousin and dear friend, and I gladly took on the challenge of a difficult student. It is not my place now to mentor this child. I have done as much as I can for her. She is yours. It is your place to help her from here. To help her as I helped you.” With a swirl of air, Gabriella’s form vanished, leaving Nicco alone in the room.

He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. It had been a long while since he had received such a lecture from Gabriella. How irritating that she could still make him feel like a scolded child. And how curious that she insisted he become involved with Grace’s life beyond assigning Anthony to work with her.

Gabriella wasn’t telling him everything underlying her desire for him to mentor Grace. But if his suspicions about the girl’s situation were correct, her problems had become his.

## Chapter 19

Billy's car pulled up just as Grace finished bringing in an extra chair from the kitchen into the living room. She wanted them to be comfortable while working but also to have enough space to spread out on the large table. Danny would remain incognito and wouldn't need a chair.

Grace went back into the kitchen to finish putting out the drinks and snacks. She figured Billy would let himself in as usual, so she focused on the job at hand. She wasn't sure how long they would work, but if they worked long, they would need a few carbs to keep their attention focused.

Grace was wondering what happened to Billy when the doorbell rang.

As she hurried out of the kitchen to answer it, Danny came running down the stairs. "*It's Billy. And a new guy is with him.*"

"*Must be Anthony. Prepare yourself for major attitude,*" she warned as she opened the door.

"Hey, Gracie." Billy turned to the side to give her a hug with one arm, his heavy frame dwarfing hers. In the other arm, he carried the materials he and Stan had put together.

After returning his hug, Grace turned to Anthony and acknowledged him with a nod. "Anthony," she said with minimal enthusiasm.

"Good evening, Grace," Anthony responded. "It is nice to finally get a chance to see the inside of your home."

Grace looked at him with narrowed eyes. That sure sounded like a back-handed compliment.

Billy nudged her with his elbow. "Are you going to leave us standing out here on the landing all night?"

"Oh, sorry." She moved out of the doorway to give them room.

Grace turned from closing the door to find Billy already setting up

his materials. They included a map of the city, which he was unrolling to take over most of the table. She turned her attention back to Anthony, who stood in front of her, proffering a bottle of wine.

“It is customary in my family to bring a gift for the hostess when gathering at someone’s home.” He raised the bottle. “Do you have a corkscrew I may use?”

Grace raised an eyebrow at him but played along, given he was here to help them with the case.

“I don’t think I have wine glasses.” She told herself not to be embarrassed by the fact as she led him toward the kitchen.

“Oh.” His posture stiffened. “Well, we will just have to make do with whatever I can find.”

Grace motioned him to proceed, still trying to figure out what his game was when the doorbell rang again.

*“It’s DL.”*

*“All right, Mr. Know-It-All. Get settled somewhere so you can see everyone. I want your eyes and ears for this discussion, to make sure we aren’t missing anything.”*

*“Right-e-o.”* Danny moved to the table to look over the map.

Grace opened the door and offered DL a wide smile, waving him into the apartment. “Glad you could make it,” she said.

“I hope we can make more progress this time,” DL said as he entered the room, carrying a plain brown shopping bag with the top rolled down.

“Billy’s setting up on the table again. Why don’t you join him while I check on Anthony?”

DL walked over to join Billy, exchanging stiff nods while she moved to go check on Anthony’s progress with the wine.

Grace popped her head through the doorway to catch Anthony grabbing a handful of pretzels from a bowl on the counter. She quelled the desire to reprimand him, stopping the “Those are for later,” she wanted to

blurt out.

Instead, she said, “We’re ready to start if you want to come join us in the other room.”

Anthony raised the handful of pretzels in acknowledgment and followed her, finishing the mouthful of food as they joined the others.

“Anthony, this is Billy, an officer with the thirty-second precinct. He’s found information to help with the case.”

Anthony reached out to shake hands. “Yes, Billy and I met at your front door.”

Grace looked from Anthony to Billy as the hand shake seemed to go on a bit too long, Anthony appraising Billy intently. Maybe that was why it took Billy a while to get to the door. And why he rang the doorbell instead of coming straight inside as usual.

“This is DL,” she continued, breaking into their silent exchange. “DL’s girls are the ones going missing.”

Anthony turned and shook hands with DL, a shorter appraisal resulting in pursed lips as he took in the tattoos and DL’s stern demeanor. “DL.” he said.

DL responded with a polite “nice to meet you,” and sat at the table.

“*Definitely a bit of an ass.*” Danny rolled his eyes.

“*Let’s hope he can contain his attitude so we can get somewhere tonight.*” Grace moved to stand next to the table.

“Billy, why don’t you catch Anthony up on what we’ve found so far?” Grace suggested as the rest of the group sat down at the table.

Billy walked through the information he had gleaned from the police records, pointing out on the map the circles representing the prostitutes that had gone missing. Then DL shared what he had on the missing girls, following Billy’s example to point out the circles representing the girls.

“But that’s as far as we got.” DL slumped back into his chair.

“We know we have an overlap of where the victims were last seen,

but we can't make out any pattern for when and where they're being taken. Which means we can't predict when or where the next woman might be at risk," Billy said.

"So that is all you have to go on?" Anthony asked. "No wonder Grace came to me for help with this 'mystery.'"

"We're not sure, yet, what it all means." Grace jumped in as DL's face reddened and Billy scowled. "But let's take a look at what DL brought from one of the missing girls. I'm hoping it will get us further along."

DL appeared a bit confused by the change of direction. But he reached down to roll open the bag next to his chair and pulled out a sweater.

"This was Sabra's." He held the sweater for a moment. Then he asked, "Are you going to give it to a tracking dog or something?"

Anthony sighed dramatically. "It is unnecessary to use dogs for this. Dogs are effective for a few hours when you know where the person of interest was last seen. It has been—what?—weeks, since the girl went missing?" He looked at Grace for confirmation.

When she nodded, Anthony continued. "Grace will try to read the sweater to find out what happened to the girl."

"What do you mean, 'read'?" DL asked, still not sounding sure of the conversation.

Grace ground her teeth. She had wanted to be the one to tell DL. She hoped he wouldn't be skeptical of the information coming from a stranger, rather than her.

"DL, they're serious," Billy said matter-of-factly. "I've seen Grace do this sort of thing several times before. She can get a sense of things from touching objects. She's used her ability to solve missing person's cases in the past by reading things."

DL looked from Billy to Anthony and then to Grace. "You're not joking, are you? You can do something that strange?"

"Yes," Grace did not hesitate.

Anthony sighed again. “It is not ‘strange.’” Anthony made air quotes with his fingers. “It is what some people do naturally,” he said, a slight air of superiority tinting his words.

He glanced over at Grace and amended, “And Grace can, as well.”

Grace ignored the aside and turned to DL, taking over the conversation. “I have a supernatural ability which allows me to ‘see’ things when I touch objects.”

“Grace and I both have this ability,” Anthony added.

Billy looked surprised by Anthony’s statement but then nodded to himself.

“Do you all have this ability?” DL stared at the three of them, one after the other.

Anthony smirked but said nothing.

Billy laughed out loud. “No, Grace and Anthony are the only ones here who can do readings. I’m as normal as you are, in that respect.”

“*Let’s not forget the ghost in the room isn’t one, either.*” Danny sounded annoyed.

“*Billy’s aware neither of them know about you. He won’t put you at risk by mentioning it in front of Anthony.*” Grace tried to keep Danny focused.

“*Right.*” Danny grumbled in response.

DL set the sweater in his lap, running his hands over it. “You’ll use this sweater to tell us where Sabra is?”

“Yes. Although what I get isn’t always detailed or specific. Sometimes it’s more general.”

He turned to Anthony. “If Grace can do the reading, why do we need both of you?”

## Chapter 20

“I’m here because sometimes different clairvoyants get different things from reading the same object. We do not want to miss out on opportunities to get as much information as possible,” Anthony answered.

“Besides, I am much more experienced with readings than Grace. I do this type of thing on a weekly basis with a crowd of strangers at the theater. But Grace has only done a few readings, to the best of my knowledge.”

“*Okay, he’s a big ass,*” Danny said.

Grace gritted her teeth, reminding herself that they needed Anthony’s help to do something about DL’s missing kids.

Before she could respond with something inappropriate, Billy spoke.

“It sounds like a solid plan for multiple people to do readings tonight.” Billy eyed Grace in a way conveyed he would want a full explanation later of how such an ass came to join their group.

Grace hadn’t expected Anthony to admit he was clairvoyant, let alone be willing to do a reading tonight. Nicco promised Anthony would help with the case. She supposed this was what he meant—even if it came with having Anthony put her down while doing it.

Grace held out one hand for the sweater. After a moment’s hesitation, DL gave it to her, still looking a bit skeptical. Grace settled into her chair and spread the sweater out on her lap, smoothing the creases on the front.

With a deep breath, she closed her eyes and lay both hands on the sweater. She visualized the dark material sliding away from her fingers to her palms and up her arms, leaving her hands in direct contact with the soft fabric.

Grace felt an overwhelming sense of fear, pain, and despair, and a

bone chilling coldness. She had a flash of a concrete floor, pools formed from water dripping off broken pipes in the ceiling. Then a blank nothingness.

With a sigh, Grace got control of her emotions and opened her eyes, smoothing out more invisible creases in the sweater, and visualized the dark material sliding down her arms, and over her palms and her fingers, closing her off from Sabra's sweater.

Leaning forward, DL asked, "What did you see? Where she is?"

Grace met DL's eyes. "I got something, but it's vague." She shook her head.

"Anthony, do you want to try?" she asked, offering the sweater to him.

He gave her a smug smile and took it, holding it in both his hands. It was the first time Grace could watch another clairvoyant do a reading. She couldn't tell if he was doing anything different than her to interact with the sweater or to engage his ability. He only sat there staring at it without moving.

*"Can you see anything happening? Is he doing something special?"* she asked Danny.

*"I can't see him doing anything like what you do."* Danny squinted in concentration at Anthony. *"The only thing I see is his aura growing stronger and brighter, but that's about it."*

After a moment of silence, Anthony shook his head and tossed the sweater back to DL. "There is nothing helpful to get from this."

"What did you see, then?" DL turned to Grace.

"The insides of a warehouse—an old unused warehouse. That's all I could get. I didn't get a sense of Sabra's presence." Grace glanced at Anthony and saw his eyes widen at what she was sharing.

"I'm sorry, DL. There's no easy way to tell you this. But I think Sabra's dead." She reached out to place one of her hands on top of his,



holding the sweater.

DL grasped the sweater, staring hard at her. “Dead? I can’t believe it! Did you see her dead?”

“DL,” she said gently. “She’s dead. I would’ve had a sense of her presence and what was going on with her otherwise. All I have is an echo of where she was killed.”

“Who did it? Who’s the bastard who did this to her?”

“I have a general picture of him from Beth’s reading,” she said. She noticed DL’s look of surprise but continued. “Enough to recognize him if I saw him again, but together we can figure out more of what’s happening.”

DL glared at Grace as he grabbed the brown paper bag and shoved the sweater into it.

“I trusted you, Grace. But you’ve dragged me over here multiple times on the pretense that your friends could help me figure out what’s happening to my girls. Working with a cop at least made sense. But this mumbo jumbo crap with readings and claiming Sabra’s dead? That you saw the killer and have a ‘vague’ awareness of where she was murdered—?”

“DL—” Grace began as he stood.

“Thanks for wasting my time,” he said as he headed for the door.

“You arrogant fool. Who is next?” Anthony said in a loud voice.

DL stopped with his hand on the doorknob and turned to glare at him. “What do you mean?”

“Give me the name of the girl you want to be the next victim. Grace says she saw the killer and where the girls are being killed. If you refuse to believe what she saw and walk away tonight, then more girls will die. So which one are you ready to see die, next? Name her.”

DL’s hand released the doorknob and slowly lowered to his side.

The room remained in complete silence as he returned to sink back into his seat on the sofa. His fists clenched around the top of the brown bag as he stared at Grace with a pained expression.

Grace leaned over to place a hand on his arm.

“I know it is a lot to take in at one time. But even though I gained a supernatural ability after my accident, I’m still the same person I was before. The same person you’ve known for years. I swear on my parents’ graves that I’m not joking around. This is real, and this is what may allow us to solve the case.”

DL shifted back and forth a few seconds before nodding. He placed the brown bag down on the floor and appeared to gather himself.

“Okay, Grace. I’ll stay. What do we do with the information you learned?”

Grace pointed to the map on the table and the markings they added earlier. “Let’s see how we can pull the pieces together. We’ve got five main areas the women and girls are disappearing from. The areas are near Midtown but not equidistant from it. Names and locations and not much else.”

“We’ve got dates,” DL reminded her.

“What dates?” Anthony asked. “I thought you only had locations on a map.”

“We’ve got approximate dates for when the women went missing or were last seen,” Billy said.

“Yeah, see where we added them next to each location,” DL added. “But there’s no pattern in the dates or the locations.”

“No, you are wrong,” Anthony said. “I see something.”

He leaned closer. “How far apart are the dates?”

“About a month each, give or take,” Grace said.

“And each month another person goes missing, correct?” Anthony asked.

“Yeah, but the kidnapping locations jump around. The women aren’t abducted from the same place multiple months in a row. And the abductions are not in the same place at the same time each year.” Billy’s hand swept to

indicate the spots spread across the map.

“Not quite,” Anthony said. “Read them off in order, by date, one-by-one for me. Leave out the ones that are not part of these five major groupings.” He pointed to the overlapping areas from Billy’s and DL’s groups. “Those are likely not related.”

As Grace read off the dates from the map, Anthony wrote each of the dates on a fresh sheet of paper. After they were through, he bent his head and began scribbling out to the side of each date.

“*Still not seeing anything but a mess of dates.*” Danny seemed unimpressed.

“*Neither do I. But it seems like Anthony is on to something.*”

Anthony finished his scribbling and handed the paper to Grace.

“Read off the locations in the order of the numbers I wrote beside them,” he said. “I will show you on the map what I believe is the pattern for the attacks.”

As Grace read through the dates, Anthony pointed to the spots on the map. For the first several items, it didn’t appear to be anything but random motions of his hand. But by the end of the list, Grace thought she understood what he was getting at.

Grace pulled out a pen. “Anthony, would you mark off what you just showed us? It might help us visualize things better.”

Anthony raised his eyes to the ceiling for a moment but took the pen. He drew out the symbol on the map with the points of a star hitting each of the five areas of overlapping color. He laid the pen on the table, then stepped back to analyze the results.

“A star!” Grace said.

“Not a ‘star’,” Anthony corrected her. “It is a pentagram.”

DL was on his feet and back at the map.

“A ‘what’-a-gram?” Billy asked staring at the drawing on the map.

“A *pentagram*,” Anthony repeated. “It is a shape that holds special

significance for people with supernatural powers.”

Grace glanced at Anthony. “So you think a Par...someone with supernatural powers is involved in this.”

Anthony nodded. “I suspected it once I picked out the pattern. The pentagram pattern of attacks is based on the Dreamspell calendar—a modern interpretation of the Mayan calendar by New Age spiritualists and supernaturals. It uses a 260-day sacred calendar rather than a 360-day solar calendar. That is why the pattern made no sense until I converted it and interpreted it.”

Despite herself, Grace was impressed. She had to admit having Anthony as part of the group was paying off.

Anthony continued. “It would explain a great deal if someone with supernatural ability was involved. It would be unusual for several disappearances to happen and no one to see or hear anything—girls gone without leaving a trace. It is not something a normal person could do multiple times. Not without leaving any clues.”

“Anthony’s right,” Billy said. “It’s been driving me crazy, wondering how John Doe is able to get away with this. But someone like you and Grace could, right?”

“Not a clairvoyant like Grace and me,” Anthony said. “But someone with a different ability, yes. One who can make people forget he and the women were even there.”

*“That’s way cool!”* said Danny. *“Sick way to use a Paranormal ability, but way cool.”*

Grace’s stomach sank. “There are people with the ability to control minds?”

“It’s not true mind control,” Anthony said. “They do not have that strong a capability. The ability to convince people to ignore them, not see them, or forget they’ve been there? Yes, they can do that. When it showed up in the past, it was termed a ‘Glamour.’”

“Who in the city can do this?” Grace asked, annoyed to be learning about it now and not earlier.

“No one I know of,” Anthony said. “I am only aware it is possible.”

“It might be someone outside your circle who’s got this ability?”

Billy suggested.

“It is very unlikely, but it might be feasible for someone to come and settle in the city without us finding out about him. With his abilities, he could avoid the other supernaturals and focus on areas vacant of Paranorms for his searches for women.” He motioned to the clusters of color on the map.

“And there is something else you need to be aware of,” he said.

“These types tend to be unstable. They become addicted to their ability to manipulate people and escalate their use of Glamour over time.”

“Escalate?” Billy looked at Anthony with concern.

“Yes, they use their abilities more and more frequently and become blatant about their use, even flaunting their powers.”

“Where does that leave us?” Grace asked. “How do we catch him? Where is he going next?”

DL tapped the circle with Beth’s name. “This was Beth five nights ago.”

Anthony followed the lines of the pentagram with his finger to the next point in the pattern. “Here. He will be here, next.”

“But when?” Grace asked.

“Every month or so, right?” Billy leaned forward to stare intently at the map. “Starting in about three weeks, we should look for him. It will be a month from the last attack.”

“I think we can be more accurate,” Anthony said. “Can someone pull up the moon cycles for the last couple of years on the Internet for me? I want to compare those dates to the ones we have for the missing girls.”

Grace pulled out her phone and searched for the information Anthony needed. She set the phone down in front of him to let him compare

the data to what was on the map.

“Just like I thought, the dates are falling near the full moon. We should focus our efforts around the next full moon at the expected location. We will have a chance of catching up to him before he kidnaps another girl.”

## Chapter 21

DL felt his sense of helplessness starting to diminish now that they had established the pattern of attacks. He looked around the room at everyone before speaking.

“So, now we know when and where to expect the Glamour. What’s our plan going to be? I can tell the girls to stay away from this location until we’ve caught him, but how do we plan to catch him?”

Billy spoke first. “We should bring this to the police and have them set up an official sting. We can use the resources of the police department to catch him, based on the description Grace got from Beth.”

DL pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. “I tried going to the police before, and they did nothing.”

“But that was before we had the additional information about the prostitutes and the Glamour’s description,” Billy said.

“But all we have is circumstantial evidence, a description from a girl attacked but not kidnapped, and a New Age theory on how it all connects. No offense, Anthony,” DL said.

“None taken.” Anthony smiled and waved his hand at him.

Billy scowled. “I thought you wanted us to help stop this man from attacking more of your girls, DL. That’s the whole point of us getting together tonight.”

“I do.” DL glared back at Billy. “But trying to convince the police they should be the ones to find this man is a colossal waste of time. We should be out there looking for him ourselves.”

Before the argument could escalate further, Grace jumped into the conversation.

“Regardless of whether we could convince the police to take on the case, we shouldn’t involve them.”

“Since when have you decided it was a good thing to play vigilante, Grace? Of all people, I expected you would support letting the professionals handle something like this,” Billy said.

Grace pursed her lips but didn't respond. DL saw from her tense face that Billy had insulted her by placing Grace into the group of non-professionals despite her standing as a PI.

“DL and Grace are right, Billy,” Anthony said. “It would be difficult to convince the police to believe our theory without more non-paranormal evidence. More evidence than DL's notes on the girls and the sketchy arrest records for the prostitutes.”

“Thank you, Anthony,” Grace said. “My main reason for saying we shouldn't involve the police is because the Paranorm we want to catch would just glamour officers in the area. The risk is too great to the officers. And having too many people involved also means a higher risk of the Glamour fleeing before we can catch him.”

Billy sat back in his chair, crossing his arms. His scowl had shifted to a deep frown, but at least he wasn't arguing with the group.

“So, Grace, if we aren't going to involve the police, we're back to my original question. How are we going to stop this guy from hurting more of my girls?” DL asked.

“My idea is to stake out the location where we expect the Glamour to be next. We can be on the street where the girls are tricking and keep an eye out for him to show up.”

“That sounds simple enough.” Billy eased forward in his chair. “But how do you plan to get close enough to him to make sure he doesn't grab another girl or notice something unusual is going on?”

“The best option is for me to go undercover as a prostitute.”

Billy threw up his arms. “That's ridiculous!”

Grace's face went bright red. That made two strikes for Billy this evening if Grace's expression was anything to go by.



“No way! I don’t want you making yourself into bait to do this.” DL reached out to place a conciliatory hand on her arm.

“I know.” She grabbed his hand and squeezed it. “But it’s the best way to avoid suspicion and to give me a chance to get close to him. It would keep me on the street with the girls and give us direct access to him when he shows up.”

Before Billy offered a counter argument, Grace released DL’s hand and held her own up at Billy.

“I had all the undercover training you did on the force. I’m the perfect person to do this. Put me at the right location and dressed properly, and I’ll fit his victim profile. You and Anthony can sit backup for me in case the Glamour is more than I can manage, or if he tries to make an escape.”

Billy seemed to be considering it, but DL was still not convinced of the plan. “And what’s my part in the plan? Where will I be?”

“Making sure your girls are off the street and keeping them safe,” Grace said.

DL raised his chin, his frustration building. “I’m not gonna to sit on the sidelines while you go after the man that’s attacking my girls. I may not be a ‘professional,’” he said, turning to look pointedly at Billy. “But that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t be part of this. If Anthony is going to be there, so should I.”

“It’s not personal, DL,” Grace said. “Anthony will be there as backup for Billy. He’ll recognize when another Paranorm is using their powers. The fewer people there, the less likely we’ll raise the Glamour’s suspicions, and the fewer people he might glamour.”

DL wanted to contest the point further, but the others were all in agreement with him staying behind. His best bet for protecting his girls was to stop being a roadblock to the plan and find a way to make it happen.

Between the three of them, they would have a chance of spotting the Glamour and intercepting him before anything violent happened. No

guarantees, but better than the other options they'd come up with to that point.

“Fine, you three will deal with catching the Glamour then. Just make sure he doesn't get a chance to get away with hurting another one of my girls.”

## Chapter 22

The knock on the door interrupted Viora's concentration.

"Come in," she said in a raised voice as she leaned back into her plush leather desk chair, crossing her long legs beneath the knee-length, slate gray skirt. Her matching jacket hung on the back of her chair.

The door opened, and Gregory poked his gray-haired head around the corner.

"Pardon me, *Mia Signora*, but Robyn is here to see you. As is your brother, Niccolo."

"My half-brother," she said on reflex.

"Yes, *Mia Signora*, your half-brother."

"Show Robyn in, but let Niccolo wait." Viora reached up to run one hand along her neck, using her other hand to click the mouse and refresh the browser she had open on her computer. The acquisition meeting had gone well, and she was curious to follow the chatter on-line and watch as the final decision became public.

Two quick taps on the door, then Robyn slid into the room and stood a few feet in front of her desk. She sensed his eager gray eyes on her face as she concentrated on the computer.

Robyn broke the silence. "What are they saying? How much are things going up?"

In response to his impatience, Viora continued to concentrate on the monitor in front of her. After a while longer reading through some text, she replied without raising her eyes.

"It is going as well as I expected. The stock is climbing already." After a few more moments of scrolling, she released the mouse and sat back in her chair, allowing a predatory smile to break across her face at her success.

Robyn's body language had relaxed and relief crossed his face.

"You did well, my pet," she said. "There were no complications after I left?"

Robyn's answering smile was broad, his capped teeth shining in the light from the windows. "No problems at all. They were all pleased with how everything turned out. I made sure of that."

Robyn shrank into himself under her cold stare. "I didn't overdo it, I promise!"

"We talked about the delicate nature of these meetings. You do fine while I am leading the negotiations. Your touch is subtle, and no one is aware that anything other than a normal meeting is happening. But I wonder about when I leave the room."

Viora glared at him until his shoulders hunched under the force of her disapproval.

"I am beginning to think it is not a wise decision to leave you alone with the clients." She loathed being wrong.

Robyn's left eye twitched. "No, no. I did everything the way you told me to. Not too much glamour, only enough to make them happy about their decisions."

"Not too happy," she said, her voice lashing out.

"Only enough. A touch of doubt, but an overall feeling of getting what they wanted."

Viora smiled at the satisfaction in Robyn's voice. His pride in his skill with his ability was the only time he showed a real backbone to her face. But her smile shifted to a grimace. The problem was, he had developed a backbone during the times he was not under her direct supervision. Something she would need to handle another time.

"We'll talk about this later, once the final response from the public has come back. Ask Gregory to show Niccolo in."

While Robyn conveyed her message, Viora uncrossed and re-crossed

her legs and smoothed out her blouse.

Nicco walked into the room and took up the same position Robyn had been occupying just a moment before. He stood, holding his hands loosely behind his back, meeting her gaze directly.

Robyn followed behind Nicco but scuttled into a corner of the room, as far away from Nicco as the confines of her office would allow.

“So, Viora,” he said, not waiting for her to break the silence. “What is so important you needed me come down in person rather than making a simple phone call?”

“Ever the impolite and impatient one, eh, Niccolo?”

“Get on with whatever degradation you have for me this time, Viora. Although I am not sure why you need your little Precog here to witness it.” He waved one hand in Robyn’s direction.

Viora chortled in delight. Her subterfuge about Robyn’s powers still held sway in the family. If her half-brother had not pierced the lies she had built around Robyn’s actual ability, then she could be sure no one else even suspected.

“I have found it helps to keep him around while I conduct Family business, so he can see the futures more easily. He has been so successful because I give him what he needs—access to information and someone to worship.” She granted Robyn another smile.

“So, Robyn,” Nicco looked at him with a sneer. “Give us a prediction. Show off that power of yours.”

Viora’s smile became rigid at Nicco’s taunting.

Before she could reply, Robyn answered in a quiet voice. “I predict you will leave this office pissed off with Viora.”

Viora barked a laugh as Nicco closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Any fool with half a brain could make that prediction.” Nicco crossed his arms.

“Oh, Niccolo, don’t be so dour.”

“On the contrary, Viora. My sense of humor is the only thing that has kept me from cutting your throat all these years,” he said in with a feral smile.

Viora’s anger flared red hot as she shifted to the front of her chair. But it died down somewhat as she saw Nicco flinch and grit his teeth.

“Now, now, Niccolo. One must not threaten the head of The Family in her own domain. You know my defensive wards are activated by your intent as much as your words.”

Nicco stood with jaw muscles bulging, fists clenched, his eyes daring her.

“Your defensive wards are impressive. Most warlocks would be on their knees by now, begging me to counter the spells. But you haven’t even cried out.” Viora forced her face into a mask of calm, despite the anger boiling inside her. She let herself enjoy a few more minutes of Nicco’s suffering before waving her hand to release him and reset the spells.

He stood hunched for a few seconds before catching his breath and straightening.

Once his glare met her eyes again, she continued. “So, tell me what you learned about this *Aperto Rotto*,” she said, not quite able to keep her simmering anger from bleeding into her tone.

“Not much more than your informants were already able to discern,” he said with a mocking gleam in his eye. “She is a functional clairvoyant of modest but consistent power. I introduced her to the basics of the Paranorm world and expect to use her on occasion as her powers warrant.”

“And you detected no instability in her—no mental illness evident in her actions or words?”

“None I could see. But that doesn’t mean she won’t become unstable over time.” He shrugged. “The Family has contingencies for that.”

“Good,” she said, sitting back into her chair.

Nicco cocked his head, peering at her curiously. “What is your

special interest in this *Aperto Rotto*?”

“It’s been seen that she will be important to The Family.”

“By your pet?”

Viora just smiled to hide her now racing heart. This was why she had made Nicco come to her. She had seen it herself, multiple times, when doing her forecasting spells—a skill she had kept hidden from The Family. If the *Aperto Rotto* allied with Nicco, Viora’s position as head of The Family would be in jeopardy. However, if Viora removed the *Aperto Rotto*, even interfered with her efforts, the entire family would be at risk.

“So why am I here, Viora?” Nicco asked. “If the *Aperto Rotto* is going to be important to The Family, then why not let things continue?”

“Because you have become a *scissione del destino* on this girl’s path. Benign as it may seem, your helping the girl beyond this point will lead to disaster for The Family.”

Nicco seemed to sense she was not being completely honest because he gave her a skeptical look. “Your Precog must be superb, Viora, to make such a declarative statement. The future is always mutable, branching endlessly. He could check tomorrow, and things could be different.”

But it hadn’t changed. Ever since the day the girl had visited Nicco at the theater, she had seen the same thing. That meant she had to take control of the situation to ensure a new path was created and a delicate balance was reached.

“I cannot take the risk you will react in your usual arrogant way and ignore my warnings. I will not have you putting The Family at risk with your stubbornness.” She took a deep breath to stay calm.

“Which means what, dear sister? You are going to place the *vincolante la volontà* on me?” he asked with a condescending smile.

“To protect The Family, I most certainly will.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” His face reddened, and the veins in his brow pulsed.

“As the head of The Family, it is my right and my duty to do what I must to keep us safe.”

“And if I refuse to submit to this?” he asked.

“We both know you will not leave this room until my will is served,” she said in a flat voice.

She watched him struggling with himself, his multiple competing emotions playing over his face.

“You cannot win a battle of wills with me, Niccolo. I am head of The Family, and you are standing in my seat of power. Whether you like it or not, whether you admit it or not, there is no choice for you on this matter.”

A warm rush of energy filled her body as his stance sagged, and resignation settled on his face.

“Oh, for Powers’ sake. It is just a binding of your will as it pertains to helping the girl, nothing more. It will be an insignificant limitation to you in the long run.” She rose from her seat to approach him.

Nicco gave her one last hate-filled stare before kneeling before her.

With a broad, satisfied smile, she placed her hand on his head and began the binding.



## Chapter 23

Robyn pulled the cord to shut the wooden blinds and went to sit down in a chair, closing his eyes and resting his head against the soft back. He wouldn't have to wait long for Gustav to arrive. Gustav always wanted an update after Robyn reported to Viora.

Within a few minutes, Robyn heard the door open and close, then broad strides as someone crossed the carpeted floor to pause in front of him. He opened his eyes to see Gustav standing with crossed arms, the usual smirk creasing his face.

“Well, little Robyn, what do you have to share today? How is dear Viora doing?”

Robyn sat up in his seat, frowning at Gustav's flippant tone.

“Mia Regina is well,” Robyn said, emphasizing the honorific. “Quite pleased with herself, actually.”

“Really?” Gustav asked, his smirk deepening. “What has made her so pleased?”

“Today she placed a binding on Niccolo. A binding to keep him from assisting the *Aperto Rotto* she's been watching.”

“Now that is interesting.” Gustav's lips pressed into a thin line. “Why would she do that?”

“She said that The Family was at risk if he aided this girl beyond what he has done already.”

“At risk? Did she say anything more about how this girl could be a risk?”

“No. But she did tell Niccolo I was the one who had forecasted that. Why would she tell him that?”

“Viora is always one to have her secrets, her manipulations, her subterfuge,” Gustav said, shaking his head. “However, anyone Viora finds

that interesting is someone I need to be interested in as well. What else happened?”

“Well, before Niccolo came she wasn’t very happy with me.” Robyn looked down at his hands.

“How so?”

Robyn continued to stare at his hands, the fingers twining and un-twining.

“She thinks I’m over-doing my powers. She’s questioning whether it’s safe for me to be on my own.” His shoulders sagged.

“What else did she say?” Gustav asked.

Robyn looked up at Gustav, surprised at the intensity in his voice. “Nothing. She said we would discuss it later.”

Gustav’s eyes grew distant, and his frown deepened. He gaze searched the ceiling for a moment before coming back to Robyn’s face.

“I think, little Robyn, that I need to pay more attention to this *Aperto Rotto*. It is not a good sign that she has become so important to Viora—”

“To The Family,” Robyn interjected.

Gustav gave him a bland look before continuing.

“It appears that you are losing favor with Viora as the *Aperto Rotto* is gaining her interest. That does not bode well for my long-term plans.”

Robyn licked his lips, his eyes searching Gustav’s face.

“I don’t think I’m losing *Mia Regina*’s favor. I’ve been her favorite the whole time I’ve been with her. She just wants me to do things the way she wants them done and not give myself away.”

“Don’t be naive, Robyn. Once Viora has concluded her plans, she won’t be needing you or your powers any more. You won’t be her favorite pet, and she won’t look the other way anymore.”

Robyn could not meet Gustav’s cold eyes as nausea churned his stomach.

“Don’t worry, little Robyn. You focus on the girls that I ask you to

find. I will focus on the *Aperto Rotto*.”

## Chapter 24

Grace looked around Nicco's office while she waited for him to join her. This time it had been relatively easy for her to get an appointment with him. She hadn't had to go through the same rigmarole with Samuel and the metal detector. Fortunately, this time Danny hadn't complained when she told him she was going alone.

She walked slowly around the room, captivated by the collection of objects filling the bookshelves and tabletops. There were artifacts from a vast variety of cultures around the globe, all free of dust and in pristine condition, as if she felt she were in a museum rather than an office.

And the books were on topics as varied as the objects. Each was bound in what she thought was real leather, not the fake modern imitation leather. So many books in the age of ebooks! There were nonfiction books about botany, geography, animal husbandry—with several books on equines of all breeds—chemistry, biology...and that was only one side of the room. The other side contained books of fiction from all the masters and hit every author on her college English literature reading lists. Each of the books looked well read, the leather showing signs of years of handling by a respectful reader.

She wondered how much was here for show, how much was for the image Nicco wanted to project, and how much was a true reflection of his personality and character. Quite an interesting man by all appearances.

She didn't feel guilty snooping around Nicco's office. Obviously he expected her to do just that since he kept her waiting without him. With a glance at the door, she moved to one of the shelves and switched the positions of a bronze carving of some kind of lion and a small green pot painted with bright flowers. With a satisfied smirk, she moved to take the seat in front of his desk.

A few seconds later, Nicco walked in, striding across the room until he reached the book shelf that Grace had rearranged. There he stopped and stood looking at the two moved objects. Then, with a glance at Grace, he shifted them back to their original positions, turning the lion until it faced the door. Housekeeping done, he walked to sit opposite the desk from her.

Grace resisted the urge to stand when he moved behind the desk. Some part of her responded as if he were royalty or a high ranking official to whom she was supposed to show respect. He might be the power behind the Paranorms, but right now, to her, he was just a man with knowledge she needed.

“Good morning, *mio caro*. Sorry to keep you waiting. The needs of the business demanded my time. How may I be of service to you today?”

Grace smiled. It appeared Nicco would always be the charming and cordial gentleman when they met. At least at the beginning of their encounters, but not necessarily by the end, based on their last meeting.

“Good morning. Thank you for meeting with me again. I take it Anthony has gotten you up to speed in the last few days on our progress? And our theory that a Glamour is the one kidnapping the girls?”

“Ah, *mio caro*, straight to the point. How refreshing!” Nicco responded with what appeared to be a genuine smile. He definitely looked more relaxed and expressive than the last time they met.

“Yes, Anthony updated me on the progress in your case. I believe your assessment is sound, given the evidence.”

Okay. So far so good if Nicco thought they were on track.

“I was hoping you would give me more information on this type of Paranorm, this Glamour.” Grace worked to keep the need out of her voice.

“The better prepared we are, the more chance of success we’ll have.”

Nicco nodded, and his demeanor became more solemn. “I can certainly offer more insight into this particular type of Paranorm. But we should revisit the terms of our arrangement before I do.”

“Terms?”

“Yes, *mio caro*, in any good business relationship, the terms must be clear and agreed to by both parties.”

“I think I need a review of the ‘terms’ then,” she said, the sinking feeling in her stomach growing as she realized that the previous tests were not enough.

“Certainly. You have particular questions only I or the Paranorms can answer. You proved you have Paranorm abilities, and Sophie spoke on your behalf for your trustworthiness and discretion. Therefore, you may petition for information from me. Of course, there must be payment for the information I provide.”

Grace did not like the sounds of the terms of their arrangement in the least. When did payment become part of the deal?

“What kind payment are we talking about?” she asked suspiciously.

“Information in exchange for information, *mio caro*. You have questions on the Paranorms and their abilities, their world. I require you to use your skills to provide me the information I seek. That was our exchange the first meeting, no?”

A sense of dread settled over her. “The tests I did previously weren’t just testing my abilities to confirm I am a Paranorm? They were also payment for Anthony’s help on the case?”

Nicco nodded while a small smile played across his face. “You have proven that you are capable of readings that not even Anthony can accomplish, and I am more than willing to take advantage of that with this arrangement.”

Grace had survived the last round of clairvoyant and psychometric “experiences.” Now she knew how cautious to be in handling anything Nicco gave her to read. She needed the information she could get only from Nicco. If it meant whoring out her abilities to a stranger, then it was something she would have to do.

“So in exchange for answering my questions, I need to do more readings for you?” she asked.

“No, *mio caro*. In exchange for doing more readings, I will answer your questions.”

“Does the quality of my reading, the amount of information I give, affect the amount of information you’ll share?” She worried her new ability would not be consistent enough to meet Nicco’s expectations.

Nicco smiled at her. “Yes. The number of readings is not as important as the quality and quantity of information I gain from your readings.”

Grace’s frustration rose. Was nothing up front or straight up with these people? With this man? Once again, she experienced the groundlessness of dealing with this new world she was forced to join.

She may have their abilities, but she wasn’t one of them, and she didn’t understand how things worked in their world. She had received a few hard lessons in the past week or so, but she was still in the dark for how to deal with these types of situations.

What had Gabriella told her? Be bold, and be herself. The bold part she could do, even if she had to fake it. But the part about being herself was getting more elusive all the time. Her self-identity was a moving target at this point. Best to focus on being bold and hope the being herself part showed up when she needed it.

“I understand the terms of the arrangement. Let’s get started.”

Nicco opened a drawer at the side of his desk and pulling out two cloth wrapped objects, gently placing them in front of Grace. One lay flat on the table and the other was about the size of a football.

“I am providing two objects for you. As your abilities are still new to you, I want to ensure you have a fair chance to do a reading for me today.”

Grace’s confidence started to slip at his words. So he was being “generous” to let her read two objects because her abilities were not a

hundred percent under her control? Grabbing a hold of the spark of defiance, she used it to stoke her anger. She would need that energy to focus on using her ability to its fullest. She should thank Nicco for pissing her off enough to move her past her initial nervousness. It got her in the frame of mind to prove herself to him.

“It doesn’t matter which one I read first?”

Nicco shook his head and gestured for her to continue.

Grace took a deep breath to settle herself and then reached out to unwrap the cloth from around the football shaped object to reveal a shoe.

Grace studied the shoe for a moment, careful not to touch it. She reminded herself the dagger from her last reading was anything but what it appeared at first. So, she should avoid any preconceived story lines for this object before she began the reading.

It was a dark blue tennis shoe. The left shoe, she noted, laces untied and flopping loose. A high-end-brand, leather running shoe with a well-worn sole. There were no distinguishing marks on the shoe that she could see, simply a plain running shoe.

She replayed in her mind how she blocked the pain of the dagger during the second reading. Then connected with that feeling as she reached out her right hand to touch a finger to the shoe and visualized the dark material sliding away and leaving her finger in direct contact with soft leather.

There was the sensation of running, of extreme fear, of a desperate need to escape. From what, it wasn’t clear. But the need drove her to run past the exhaustion, past the pain in her legs and sides, to simply keep moving.

Running through dark woods at night. Stumbling over the roots and rocks underfoot. Falling down several times to scrape hands and knees before struggling up again. She just needed to make it the last couple of miles north to the glen, and she would be safe. All at once, the shoe was pulled forcefully off her foot as she blindly stepped into a hole. Grace’s awareness stayed with



the shoe as its owner ran on.

Grace looked up from the shoe, removing her finger and resting her hands in her lap. “The owner was running from something, and they were terrified of being caught. They were in the woods, at night. They were trying to go ‘north to a glen’ somewhere, but that’s all I saw before they lost the shoe.”

Grace paused for Nicco to respond. But he simply sat and watched her from behind his desk.

Turning to the next object, she tried not to be disappointed at how little she was able to get from the shoe. At least she had seen something, so her ability was at least showing up this morning.

Unfolding the cloth around the second object revealed a woman’s scarf; a lovely red silk material with patterns of pink cherry blossoms. There was something familiar about it that she couldn’t quite place.

Grace hoped the object would be as benign as it appeared. She repeated the same process mentally before reaching out to touch the scarf.

Grace heard music and laughter and experienced a sense of joy. She was in a sunny room with bright yellow walls. She was spinning and dancing around the room, dancing with someone. When she looked down, she saw Danny’s face around the age of five beaming up at her.

Grace recoiled from the scarf, propelling herself backward so forcefully, she tipped over her chair. She stood, shaking and gasping for air as she stared wide eyed at Nicco. With a barely controlled rage, she shouted at him. “You bastard! Where did you get my mother’s scarf?”

## Chapter 25

“Sit Down, Miss Bishop,” Nicco said in a tone that expected immediate obedience.

Grace hesitated, considering walking out of the room, damn the consequences. But she couldn’t walk away from something to help DL and his girls. She also couldn’t leave without answers for herself, no matter what the potential emotional or psychological price was.

She bent down to pick up the chair, shoving it back upright before taking her seat, still fuming at Nicco. She pulled the collar of her shirt back over her left shoulder from where it fell when she leaned down. The bastard better have an explanation for how he managed to get possession of one of her mother’s favorite scarves.

“You are upset by the second object—” he began.

“Upset? Try furious!”

“And what are you furious about, *mio caro*—what you saw in the reading? Because this object is in my possession? Or both?” he asked in a business-like tone, not reacting to her anger.

Grace wasn’t about to explain to him what she saw in the reading, regardless of their arrangement. The joyous love she felt from her mother while she danced with Danny. It was intense, wonderful, and heartbreaking, and Grace experienced the depth of losing her mother once again.

“How did you get this scarf?”

“It is easy for a Paranorm with a Dowsing ability to find things, especially things given away.”

Grace berated herself as she took in Nicco’s words. Of course they could use the Paranorms’ abilities to get the information they needed. Sophie warned her The Family had ways of controlling her, warned her they might use Danny against her. She didn’t realize they might also find a way to use

her parents against her. She thought they, at least, could not be leveraged.

She wouldn't get anywhere focusing on her mother's scarf. She needed to focus on why she came to see Nicco this morning, not on what he wanted to prove to her.

"I've done the readings. Now I'm ready to ask my questions," she challenged, looking him in the eyes.

"Yes, *mio caro*, you have. Do you care to share anything more about the scarf?" he asked her with a polite tone. "No?" he continued when met with her silence. "Then ask your questions, and I will weigh my answers predicated on the readings you provided me."

Grace wasn't sure whether it meant she would get one answer or none, based on her performance. But she decided to throw out everything she was interested in and see what he answered. "I want to know everything I can about you and your Family, about the Glamour, and about what I am, this '*Aperto Rotto*' name you keep calling me."

The side of his mouth quirked. "Impressive list."

"I suppose, but it's a list I'll be repeating each time we meet until I get the answers I need," she said.

The comment elicited a chuckle from Nicco and a nod of respect. "So be it. These are the questions I will answer, then."

"One," he said, holding up a finger. "Think of The Family as entrepreneurs who consider the Paranorms employees vital to the success of our business operations. I am middle management."

She started to interject, but he continued, ignoring her.

"Two." He raised a second finger. "The Glamour is one of the most unpredictable Paranorm abilities we have ever seen. Throughout history, there only have a handful of them who survived beyond their childhood. These individuals became obsessed with their ability, addicted to its use and misuse, became megalomaniacs in the modern psychological terminology. They were put down before they could destroy more lives. Some of The

Family tried to use the Glamours' skills to gain or maintain their own power, but the Glamours always became too unstable to control."

Grace paled at the description, her hands beginning to sweat. She clenched them into fists, resolved they wouldn't stop trying to catch the Glamour. They would need to prepare for the completely unexpected when engaging with this person.

"The Achilles heel of the Glamour, beyond the manipulation his megalomania opens him up to, is the fact he cannot use his abilities on other Paranorms. This is true for all Paranorms and their abilities. But this limitation makes the Glamour particularly vulnerable since he focuses his entire life and approach to the world on the predicate that he can manipulate others at will. There is a chance this particular Glamour has not encountered Paranorms and is not aware his power does not affect them."

It surprised Grace to learn Paranorms couldn't use their abilities on other Paranorms. It wasn't something Sophie and Anthony had mentioned to her. Of course, there seemed to be a lot they hadn't gotten around to sharing with her, yet.

She would need to keep that blind spot of theirs in mind for the future. She would keep in mind for herself that she wouldn't be able to read Paranorms. Or at least not directly perhaps. Something to test with Sophie later, she thought, forcing herself to focus back on Nicco.

"And finally, *mio caro*, question three," he said, raising a third finger. "'*Aperto Rotto*' is the name given to those who are not born with their abilities, are not members of a Paranorm family, but come into their abilities later in life. A traumatic physical, emotional, or psychological event can trigger this kind of transformation in certain individuals.

"In our history, *Aperto Rottos* have always been uncontrolled and dangerous with their powers. Depending on the specific ability, they either pose a risk to the Paranorms and The Family by exposing such abilities to the Norms, or they hurt Norms by accident or on purpose, being outside the

tenents governing the use of Paranorm abilities.”

“Is that why Anthony was determined to be against me at first? He thinks I pose a threat to him and his family, his way of life?”

“Yes. I am afraid all Paranorms will respond this way when they find out you are an *Aperto Rotto*. They have valid reason. Inquisitions, pogroms, witch hunts. The things you read in the history books are hard to forget realities for Paranorms. Being recognized for what they are means their lives can be in jeopardy.”

Grace considered what Nicco said, confirming her assumptions. But how was she supposed to get around being who she was, what she had become? “Above all things, be yourself” is what Gabriella instructed her, knowing what Grace was. But it looked like it would be a challenge to do that with the Paranorms.

Sophie knew Grace well and didn’t find her abilities abhorrent. She remained her friend after Grace became an *Aperto Rotto*. Sophie did what she was able to get Grace more connected with the Paranorms, to help her with her situation. Somehow, Anthony was coming around, or at least was at the point of being civil with her.

Maybe if the others continued to get to know her—to know she wouldn’t expose them with her abilities, understand she had enough control and presence of mind to command her gifts—they would accept her over time as something other than simply an *Aperto Rotto*. Maybe that was what Gabriella meant. She could only trust it was true and keep doing what she must to solve the case. The rest would have to work itself out in the meantime.

“Are those all the answers I get today?” She wasn’t optimistic at the chances of Nicco sharing anything more.

“That is what your readings earned you today, *mio caro*. You may come back another time if you wish to exchange more information,” he said in what appeared to be a dismissal.

Grace rose from her seat, and turned to go. But Nicco stopped her before she took more than a few steps.

“I have a question of my own before you go. I see you got a new tattoo. May I see it up close?”

Part of Zack’s raven tattoo must have been visible when she picked up the overturned chair. Why would he be interested in her tattoo? She had gotten past being embarrassed by the scars left over from her accident. She didn’t worry about what she couldn’t change.

“Sure.” She shrugged off her shirt to her mid back, a bit self-conscious even if she was wearing a sports bra underneath it. At least it was a sports bra and not some lacy thing. She pulled the strap of the bra over her shoulder, giving him a full view of the tattoo.

His eyes glanced at the rough flesh of her right shoulder, but he made no mention of the scars. Moving in closer to take in the details, his sapphire eyes stared at the raven, pausing for a while when his gaze reached the scroll held in its claws.

A chill ran up her spine and raised the hairs along her arms as she stood motionless under Nicco’s appraisal. This was the closest she had been to the man since they met, and the sheer power of his personality pressed on her.

She examined his features while he was preoccupied, moving past the captivating blue eyes to study his high cheekbones and strong jaw. Definitely handsome, even close up, although the earrings threw her off—not the type of thing she often found appealing in a man.

Nicco leaned in to examine the details of the raven’s feathers, his breath caressing her skin. She suppressed an urge to laugh at the tickling feeling.

And his scent, gods help her, the man smelled fantastic! He wasn’t one of those men who needed to bathe in cologne. His scent was a mixture of a hint of spicy, exotic cologne and a more personal musky smell. But

whatever it was, it was marvelous.

*Get a hold of yourself, Grace.* In the past year, she hadn't been this close to a man outside her male friends. But that didn't mean she should go all weak-in-the-knees over it.

"It's exquisite," he said, standing up straight again.

"A friend of mine designed it, and another friend did the actual tattoo," she said as she pulled her bra strap and shirt up again.

"They did a tremendous job—a work of art. And what does the saying on the scroll mean?"

"It's something the designer added for me," she replied. "He knows I worked in law enforcement and am now a security officer and part time PI. He wanted to make a statement."

"Hmm." Nicco moved back around his desk to retake his seat. "Thank you for showing me the tattoo, *mio caro*. A word of advice. I would not share it with the Paranorms. Tattoos hold particular meaning to them, and you would not want them making assumptions about the meaning of yours. I wish you good luck with your case."

## Chapter 26

Grace adjusted her ear-piece as she settled herself into a more comfortable position in her car. She had parked far from street-lights, in a dark place where she was able watch the street without being too obvious. She took a bite of her sandwich as she scanned the street.

Grace was surprised Billy and Anthony managed to get along, being cooped up in a car together for several days in a row. It could be challenging for partners who had been working together a while and knew each other's routines and personality quirks, let alone two strangers from different worlds.

When she asked Billy how it was going with Anthony after the first night, he had told her Anthony's ego had been a pain to deal with at first, but he was getting used to it. After the third night, Billy seemed to think Anthony was a decent enough guy. For Billy, that was a glowing compliment.

She was happy, for Billy's sake, that Anthony was behaving himself, but she was skeptical this version of Anthony would continue to show up if they needed to work the case much longer. Regardless of how Billy felt about Anthony, now that they knew that Paranorms were immune to the Glamour's powers, he had even more reason to keep Anthony close by.

*"Keeping your eyes open, kiddo?" she asked Danny. "I know it's been a long few days, but the Glamour might show up at any time."*

*"Yeah. We need some better gadgets, Gracie. More than just a lousy ear microphone."*

*"That's for the backup, in case things get out of hand."*

Danny sighed and returned to his "surveillance," his eyes moving from one prostitute to another.

Grace smiled at his clear captivation with the ladies.

*"Yes, Anthony said the best bet is if we can spot evidence of the Glamour using his ability on the people or maybe one of the girls. Anything*



*that's out of place."*

"*Like that car?*" Danny pointed to a car down the street.

Grace focused her attention on the beat-up, blue Toyota Camry Danny pointed to, which was parked between the street lights in a darker section of the street. People were ignoring the car completely, going by without a second glance, or swerving at the last minute to avoid without seeming to register what they were doing.

Grace spoke quietly, maintaining an intense focus on the car. "Billy, check on this license plate number." She read him the number and letter sequence. "I think we may have something here."

Billy's voice came back over the ear piece. "What do you see, Grace?"

Grace filled him in on the behavior around the car.

"Okay. I'll call this in to dispatch. Don't do anything for a minute until we can find out more on who we're dealing with here."

Grace was about to confirm when a tall blond prostitute in a short red dress walked up to the Camry.

"That's strange," she said.

"What's strange?" Billy asked.

"There's a woman going for the car. She sees it while everyone else is oblivious."

Anthony's cracked over the radio. "It's the Glamour. He's luring her in to kidnap her."

"Dammit!" Grace flung her door open. "Not tonight, buddy!" She jumped out of her car and hurried down the street, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, Danny at her side.

"Grace, god dammit! I told you to wait until we know more about this guy," Billy shouted in her ear.

"I don't think we've got time for that. He's going after her now! I'm going to intercept. Be ready on your end in case he makes a break for it."

Grace moved through the crowd on the sidewalk, trying to head to the car without giving herself away. The blonde was now only a few feet away from it, hesitant to cover the last feet to the open window.

*“Gracie, be careful. I can see his aura, and it’s bad, really bad!”*

Grace slowed her pace a bit at the warning, trying to decide the best move forward. Nicco had told her the Glamour couldn’t use his ability on other Paranorms. But she was *not* another Paranorm. She hadn’t confirmed with Nicco that Paranorms’ abilities wouldn’t work on *Aperto Rottos*.

*Great time to be thinking of the details.* She would need to trust Nicco wasn’t setting her up, and she was as immune to the Glamour’s powers.

The prostitute was still hesitating, not yet engaged with the man in the car. Despite herself, Grace was impressed by the sheer power the Glamour possessed over the Norms. He was able to keep the car hidden until he was ready to entice a victim. He was capable of mesmerizing whichever woman he pleased. This called for bravado and quick action.

Grace sauntered up to the car, keeping her eye on the prostitute. *This is your lucky night, honey.* “This one’s mine, Bitch. Go take your skanky ass on down the line.”

The woman’s unfocused eyes turned to Grace, but she seemed to have a hard time registering her presence. Grace froze. The prostitute’s eyes were the same bright green shade of Beth’s. The woman shook her head groggily and turned back to the car.

She stared at it, perplexed. “What the fuck? Where’s my Lexus?”

She moved backward from the car and jumped when she realized Grace was standing near her.

“Shit! Who the fuck are you?”

Before Grace could reply, the woman turned and dashed away, checking over her shoulder, her face full of fear.

*“Her lucky night for sure.”* Danny watched the woman as she rushed

away.

*“Yep. Now let’s see if it’s ours, too.”*

Grace turned her attention to the man in the driver’s seat of the Camry. She was not surprised to recognize the man from Beth’s reading—the gelled and styled salt-and-pepper hair, strong jaw, and high cheekbones. She thought he might use a glamour to cover his appearance, but Beth had seen the real Glamour. She suspected he didn’t need to worry about changing his features. The girls who saw him weren’t going to live long enough to tell anyone.

The gray eyes from the reading looked her up and down, seeming to appreciate what he saw. He met her eyes and smiled a broad, confident smile full of those capped teeth. After a moment, his gaze intensified, and then his smile faded to an angry scowl. Grace had a happy suspicion things weren’t going as planned for him. For once, his Glamour wasn’t having the usual effect.

At her lack of response, his face became distorted by rage, and his eyes shifted to brown, like Beth saw when she was attacked. Grace prepared herself. But instead of leaving the car, he turned away, throwing it into gear and squealing the tires as he peeled away from the curb.

“Dammit, he didn’t take the bait. He’s coming your way,” Grace said into her microphone as the car careened away and turned into an alley. “He went into the alley by the bakery,” she shouted as she ran after the car.

*“Hurry, Gracie. He’s getting away!”* Danny raced along with her.

“Fuck!” Billy’s voice was loud in her ear as his car turned into the alley right as she reached the corner.

“What?” she barked, a bit out of breath.

“He’s heading for the highway,” Billy said, his voice sounding distracted.

“Christ!” she heard, followed by the squealing of brakes and a series of thumping noises.

“Are you all right?” She ran down the alley toward the red taillights of Billy’s car.

“We are okay,” Anthony’s voice came over the radio. “Billy is taking vengeance on the steering wheel because some—”

“Asshole!” Billy yelled over Anthony’s voice.

“Some ‘asshole,’” Anthony continued, “pulled his car into the end of the alley right before we were able to get out.”

“The Glamour got away?” Grace slowed down to a walk.

“Yes,” Anthony replied. “He did.”

Grace shared her own series of thumping noises over the microphone as she began smashing trashcans in the alley.

“And the best news of the night,” Billy said in exasperation, “is I heard back from dispatch. That plate is for a car reported stolen right off the rental car lot last week. We’ve got nothing.”

## Chapter 27

Grace and Danny pulled up in front of DL's apartment, parked her car, and headed toward his place. Grace had received an anxious call from DL, not twenty minutes before, as she was preparing to drive out to meet Billy and Anthony on location. Despite his warnings to stay away from the site and off the streets, another homeless girl had gone missing late the previous evening or earlier that morning. It looked like they all had made a grave mistake assuming the Glamour gave up for the night after he got away.

Grace and Danny took the stairs together, and she was ringing the doorbell when Billy and Anthony joined her. As they all crowded together in front of the door, there was no trace of the previous tension between the two men. Before she had time to consider it further, DL answered the door. He waved them through to the living room, and closed the front door.

"What happened?" Grace asked as soon as they were all in the room.

"I think the Glamour got Celeste while she was tricking," DL explained.

"Why on earth would she be out tricking?" Grace asked DL. "Didn't you warn them to stay away until we caught this guy?"

"I did," he said in his own defense. "I tried to get them to stay at one of the local shelters. But some of the girls, including Celeste, wouldn't stay there more than a few days. They couldn't wait for us to catch the Glamour. It's been almost a week, they need the money to survive, and their pimps are not going to let them stay off the streets any longer. Even with my warnings, enough time passed that they think I'm exaggerating about the danger."

Grace shook her head, but let DL continue without interruption.

"Some of the other girls were planning on meeting Celeste early this morning. When she didn't show up, they came to me. I've been out with them all day, looking everywhere for her, but we can't find her, and no one's

seen her since yesterday.”

“Arguing about whether the girls got enough of a warning won’t change the facts,” Billy said, bringing the conversation to a halt. “We need to figure out how to get to Celeste before the Glamour hurts or kills her.”

Billy was right. She shouldn’t be throwing her anger and frustration at the situation onto DL. She forced herself to calm down and focus.

“Billy, did you have time to pick up the city map we were working on?”

Billy held up the map. “Yeah, I brought it for us to look at again. It should help us plan our next move.”

Everyone jumped in to help clear off the table, and Billy spread out the map. Each reviewed the map and the various locations shown on it.

“You were spot on about the time and location for the Glamour’s next attack using the pentagram and Dreamspell Calendar. It appears this symbol is key to what’s going on with the Glamour and what he’s doing with the girls. What else can you tell us about the pentagram? Anything to help locate him now?” Grace prompted him.

“Well...” Anthony rubbed his chin. “As I mentioned before, the pentagram is special to New Ageists and supernaturals. They considered it a protective symbol. It works as a focal point and to contain things when they do their activities and rituals.”

“Contain things?” DL asked.

Anthony waved his hand in the air, brushing away DL’s question.

“The most important thing about the symbol is its center.” He picked up a pen and circled the center of the star. “Here is where we should focus our attention.”

“It’s an awful large area to be searching for one girl,” DL said.

“Maybe not.” Grace considered the area. “In my reading of Sabra’s sweater, I saw a large, empty, run-down room. I think it was a warehouse. Did you get a similar reading, Anthony?”

“Yes, that is an accurate way to describe what I saw. A sizable but deteriorated space.” He looked at Billy. “Are there any abandoned warehouses in the circle?”

Billy peered at the street names and nodded. “You’re on the right track. The circle falls right on top of the old linen district. People abandoned the district at least a decade ago, when the market went bust. If I remember right, there are about a half-dozen old warehouses inside the circle to match what you saw.”

“Great,” Grace said. “That’s progress. It looks like we can narrow down the search to a handful of buildings at that location.

“Okay,” DL said. “But the question is which one. How are we going to find Celeste in time to save her?”

*“I think I know how,”* Danny’s voice was quiet but steady. *“If I get close enough to the Glamour, I can sense his aura.”*

“*You can do that?*” Grace worked to keep her surprise from showing to the others in the room.

*“I’ve never tried to do it that way, but I think it’ll work. Sophie and I have been practicing on my aura readings. I should be able to do it.”*

“*Practicing, huh?*” Grace remarked. *“That explains what you and Sophie were up to these past few days. It also explains why I need to keep recharging all the crystals.”*

*“Once I found out her ability was aura reading, I convinced her I’d be more help to you if I could do a better job at reading them myself.”*

*“Okay. It’s worth a shot. How close is ‘close enough’ though?”*

*“I don’t know for sure. I can see auras on people if they’re under a block away. I guess at least a similar distance for sensing them?”*

*“No offense, kiddo, but that’s a huge guess for us to rely on with a girl’s life at stake.”*

*“I have a ‘Plan B,’”* he offered.

*“‘Plan B?’”*

*“Yeah, between the two of us, we should be able to find one of the ghosts of the victims, right? I bet there’s one of them still there if it’s where he’s been killing them.”*

*“True. Anthony and I both saw the warehouse in our readings. It shouldn’t take us too long to identify the right one.”*

Grace said to the room, “The ghosts of the victims will most likely be at the place where the Glamour took Celeste. If I can find a ghost, they could lead us right to him.”

“You can see ghosts, too?” DL asked.

Grace grinned and shrugged.

Billy shook his head. “I don’t like having to rely on the chance the ghosts will be hanging around the place. It’s an awfully flimsy strategy to bet this girl’s life on.”

“Anthony and I both saw the warehouse where the Glamour took Sabra. If we can get inside the buildings, we should find where he has Celeste.”

Anthony nodded at Grace. “Nice idea. It is the best chance we have on short notice. There is no time to do anything more. It would take too long to convince regular law enforcement we are not crazy and this is a real life-threatening situation for Celeste.”

“I’m in,” DL said, his voice firm.

“Now, wait a minute,” Grace said. “We’re not all going after the Glamour.”

“Why not?” DL demanded. “I may not have special abilities like you and Anthony, but I won’t sit on the sidelines again while you go to rescue Celeste. She’s one of my girls. I have to do everything I can to save her.”

“You’re not trained for this sort of thing,” Grace countered.

“And you do not possess protection from the Glamour’s mind manipulating ability, either,” Anthony said.

DL hesitated a moment before turning back to Grace.



“Even if you make me stay in the car, I don’t care. Let me come. I might make a difference.”

Grace shook her head. But before she could say no again, DL took her hand and held it in both of his.

“Grace, this is one of my kids. I understood having me stay away when you were trying to trap the Glamour earlier. That was before he took another one of my girls, before Celeste’s life was in danger. I want to be with you to help catch whoever’s been doing this!”

Grace looked into DL’s eyes, seeing the determination there.

“*Don’t worry, Gracie. I can help look after DL. We can keep him out of harm’s way,*” Danny reassured her.

“Like Anthony said,” Billy reminded her while checking his watch. “We don’t have time to argue about who’s going. We need to move.”

“Okay,” Grace relented. “But you have to promise me you’ll do what I say when we get there.”

“*Like keeping his butt in the car?*” Danny suggested.

“Done,” DL said. “I’ll text Jennifer as soon as we’re on the road to let her know I’m going with you.”

“That settles it,” Billy announced. “Anthony and I will go together. DL, you go with Grace. We’ll start here on the north side of the area, while Grace works in from the south side. Keep in touch at all times by radio. Let each other know once you eliminate a building or if you find the right one.”

“Got it,” Grace said. “Let’s roll.”

## Chapter 28

Grace pulled into the concrete lot near of one of the abandoned warehouses. She and DL made it to the south side of the old linen district within half an hour after leaving his apartment. Billy radioed that they were already in place on the North side as Grace parked the car in the weeds next to one building, trying to avoid most of the broken bottles.

She made a mental note of the graffiti on the walls of the surrounding buildings to orient herself. Reaching across DL's knees to open the glove compartment, she pulled out the Glock she kept there while they were hunting the Glamour the past week.

Grace held the pistol out to DL. "Take it. It's one of my backups."

DL held up his hands and shook his head. "Grace, you know I can't take the gun. I can't shoot anyone. That's against everything I stand for."

"DL, there's a serial killer on the loose who can make you forget he's there long enough for him to sneak up and bash your brains in. Don't you want to protect yourself? Don't you want to take him out and get revenge for the girls he's killed if you get the chance?"

"I want justice for them," DL said, settling his hands in his lap. "Not more violence."

Grace's lips formed a thin line as she slipped the pistol back into the glove box. She searched around a moment before pulling out a can of Police Magnum OC Pepper spray. "How about this? Is this non-violent enough?"

"Yes," DL said with a grim smile. "I can use this if the Glamour shows up here."

"Fine. Go for the face, and with luck, you'll blind him long enough to get away."

"*Will it make a difference if the Glamour comes after him?*" Danny asked.

“No, but it’s the best we can do given the circumstances and DL’s stubbornness,” she admitted.

“Okay, DL. You agreed to do what I said once we got here. I want you to stay in the car and keep alert. If anything crazy happens, get the hell out of here. Don’t wait to dial 911, just leave.”

“But what about you and the guys?” DL asked.

“Don’t worry about us. We’ll be ready for him. You need to take care of yourself at this point. Agreed?”

“Yes, agreed.”

Stepping out of the car, she adjusted her pistol in the holster on her hip and motioned him over to the driver’s seat to take her place. While she waited for him to shift in behind the wheel, she squatted down to check on the knife she had sheathed in her boot. No need for a concealed carry pistol tonight, but not a time to go without some kind of backup weapon. As soon as DL locked the door, she turned to survey the warehouses.

“Can you sense anything, yet? Getting hints of the Glamour’s aura?” she asked.

“Not yet.” Danny turned to gaze at each of the nearby buildings. Then he twisted his head to grin at Grace. “But it looks like I won’t have to play bloodhound today.”

“Why not?” She followed his gaze back to the building nearest them.

“Because here comes ‘Plan B’!”

The ghost of a girl walked between the buildings, heading toward the car. She walked past Grace and Danny to stand outside DL’s window where he was sitting and looking out through her body.

Grace recognized the pink sweater the girl was wearing as the one she had read.

“Sabra?” Grace called. “Sabra, can you hear me?”

Sabra turned her head to look at Grace then returned to staring at DL.

“Sabra,” she tried again. “We need your help. We’re trying to find

*the man who hurt you. He's got Celeste, and if we can find him fast enough, we might be able to save her."*

Sabra continued to ignore Grace while she stood outside DL's window, a mixture of grief and anger playing across her face.

*"Danny, can you get her to talk to you?"*

*"I don't think she wants to talk to us, Gracie. I think she wants to talk with DL, though."*

*"Let's give it a try."* Grace turned back to DL's side of the car and motioned for him to roll down the window.

"What's happening?" he asked. "You hardly went anywhere, and now you're back?"

"Plan B," Grace responded.

"Plan B?" DL's eyes widening as he rotated around in his seat to check out the front, sides, and back of the car. "A ghost? One of my girls? Where?"

"Outside your window." Grace jutted her chin toward where Sabra's translucent form was standing.

DL pulled back from the window as far as the driver's seat would allow.

"It's Sabra. She won't talk to me, but she might talk to you. I'm hoping you can get her to show us where to find Celeste."

DL looked uncertain but settled back into the seat.

Sabra's ghost leaned in close, peering through the open window. *"Why ya bringin' them here, motha fucka? They the ones doin this to us!"*

Grace translated for DL. "Sabra's angry because you're here with me. She knows I have supernatural abilities since I tried to talk with her, and she thinks I'm a carbon copy of the Glamour. You need to tell her why we're here, in your own words."

*"Shut-up, bitch!"* Sabra snarled at her.

DL gazed out the window, focusing on the area where he imagined

Sabra was standing.

“Sabra, I’m here to stop this man from hurting Celeste or more girls. You know me. You know I’ve always tried to do my best to help you kids however I could. I help in whatever way you’ll let me. If I had the chance to stop this guy before he hurt you, I would have done it.” He leaned further out the window.

“Grace is my friend. I need her help to stop this man because I can’t do it on my own. She is *not* like him. She doesn’t use her abilities to hurt people. She uses them to help people, like Celeste. Grace will stop him from hurting anyone else if she can find him.” DL rubbed his face with both hands.

“I failed you, Sabra, but please don’t let me fail Celeste. You don’t need to trust Grace. Simply watch her take him down. We just need you to show her where he is. Can you do that?”

Sabra studied DL as tears streaked down her cheeks. After a long moment, she turned to Grace and Danny.

*“Fine. ‘Cause DL vouch for ya, I go with ya. If I find ya lyin’ to me, I fuckin’ haunt ya for life!”*

“Got it,” Grace said.

“Definitely,” Danny agreed.

*“He startin’ on Celeste. We better fuckin’ move.”*

Grace checked her watch, noting the time and the GPS coordinates.

“DL, I need to go.” She leaned in toward the window. “Sabra says she can show me where Celeste is, but I’ve got to go right now because she’s in real danger.”

DL nodded, his face grim.

Grace straightened and motioned for him to raise the window.

“Don’t forget. Get the hell out of here if things get weird or out of hand.”

DL shook his head, muttering “Weirder than it already is?” as he pushed the button and raised the window.

“*Let’s go,*” Grace said to Sabra and Danny.

Sabra darted away from the car and toward an alley way between two of the warehouses.

Grace spoke into her mic as she hurried after the retreating ghost. “We’ve contacted a ghost of one of the girls. She’s taking me to the Glamour. I’ll relay the coordinates once I’m at the location.”

“That’s fantastic,” Billy said. “We had come up empty on the first buildings we searched. Now we’ll know right where to go. Are we going to be in time?”

“Sabra says he’s started on Celeste. We’ve got to get moving,” Grace answered.

Grace broke into a run to keep up with Sabra as the ghost rushed through the maze of streets and alleys. Sabra stopped at the edge of one of the buildings, motioning Grace to hurry over to where she was standing.

“*There a hole right here.*” She pointed to a few loose boards. “*Ya gots to sneak in here.*”

Grace examined the spot Sabra pointed to, seeing there was space for her to squeeze between the boards of the wall. She would be able to enter with minimal noise to avoid alerting the Glamour.

She spoke into her mic again in a whisper. “We’re here. I’m getting ready to enter where there are some loose boards on the corner of the building.” Grace read the coordinates off her smart watch. “How soon can you get here?”

“In less than five minutes, it looks like. We’re a couple of buildings over,” Billy answered. “We’re on our way.”

“Roger. Here’s the plan. You and Anthony will provide a bit of a diversion. Try to be quiet getting in, but then make some noise. I’ll come in the back way and take advantage of the distraction to get Celeste out of there. My primary objective is to rescue Celeste. You focus on getting the Glamour contained.”

“Roger,” Billy said.

“Keep Anthony with you at all times, Billy,” Grace cautioned. “I don’t want the Glamour to surprise you.”

“Got it already,” Billy said. “Let’s get this done.”

Grace drew her pistol and pushed the boards aside with care. She placed the pistol on the ground right inside the opening. Then she lay down to snake her body through the compact hole and enter the warehouse.

She was careful not to snag her clothing on the rough edges of the planks as she wiggled through the wall, moving as fast as she could without making too much noise. The last thing she wanted was to let the Glamour know they were coming.

## Chapter 29

As soon as Grace headed away from the car, DL unlocked the door. He opened it with care to avoid making any noise, pushing it back against the frame with just enough pressure to connect with a soft click. Then he ran to follow Grace into the alley.

He couldn't see the ghost that was leading her to Celeste. But he had years of experience trailing people to keep up with her at a distance that wouldn't draw her attention. As he worked to control the sound of his breathing, he felt a pang of guilt at not keeping his promise. But he would not be left behind this time.

DL stayed behind when they were staking out the location for the Glamour, and the bastard had gotten away. The result was Celeste kidnapped and in danger because he hadn't acted when he knew he should. He wouldn't make the same mistake this time.

DL slowed as Grace approached the wall of a building. When she knelt beside it, he could see there was a hole in the wall near the ground. She spoke into her mic briefly, but she was too far away for him to hear what she said. Assuming she was coordinating with the rest of the team, he pressed himself against the corner of a building to wait.

Without looking behind her, Grace pushed her gun through and followed it. DL counted to five and scrambled across to the hole Grace had entered. He counted to fifty to give Grace a chance to clear the other side of the hole.



## Chapter 30

Grace grabbed her pistol and rose to a crouch. She waited for Danny and Sabra to join her during the few moments it took for her eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. There were no electrical lights on in this part of the warehouse. But the holes in the roof and walls let in scattered rays of late afternoon sunlight spotlighting areas of the dusty warehouse floor. The light threw the piles of rubble and loose building material in stark contrast to the surrounding shadows.

Sabra waved to get Grace's attention. "*Celeste over here.*"

"*Can he see you or hear you?*" Grace moved with caution around the better lit areas, keeping to the shadows. She was aware of how quiet it was in the warehouse and worked hard to keep the noise of her movements as minimal as possible.

"*Dunno,*" Sabra answered. "*The bast'ad blows us off when we try fight him or protect the other girls he brings here.*"

"*Blows 'us' off?*" Danny asked.

Sabra shot him a penetrating look. "*Of course, 'us.' All the ones he brought here to cut up an' kill.*"

A bright light leaked around a wall of stacked crates ahead of her, as Grace slowed. This was artificial light unlike the natural sunlight which she had been avoiding until now. She paused at the back corner of the stack, crouching down to reduce her profile.

"*Is this it?*" she asked Sabra.

"*Yeah, this where he do that shit.*"

"*Does what?*" Grace focused her attention back on Sabra.

"*Fuckin' cuts them an' takes pieces.*"

"*Pieces?*" Danny asked.

"*Yeah, he fuckin' took my hands!*" Sabra raised her arms in front of

her. The figure of the ghost shimmered before coalescing again. But now instead of hands showing, there were only ragged bloody stumps at the ends of her arms.

“*He takes everyone’s hands?*” Grace stared in fascinated revulsion at Sabra’s mutilated arms.

“*No, he take diff’n parts from each girl.*” Sabra seemed to be growing more frustrated by the moment. “*He makin’ som’thun, some fuckin’ horrible monster. He puttin’ it t’getha from all the parts!*”

“*But why?*” Grace asked.

“*To create it...her.*”

“*Her’ what?*” Grace dreaded the answer Sabra would give.

Sabra shook her head again, exasperated. “*Come here, and ya see.*”

“*Fine. Danny, you go with Sabra to the top of these crates and give me a rundown of what you see. Try to keep out of sight. I’m still not convinced the Glamour can’t see ghosts.*”

“*Okay.*” Danny sounded somewhat leery of the idea. He followed Sabra as she scaled the crates, both leaning over the edge once they reached the top.

Grace heard a scraping sound behind her. In one fluid motion, she stood up, whipping around and aiming her gun with both hands at the sound. DL’s frightened face appeared in the gloom, standing with hands raised.

“*Shit, DL!*” She whispered as she lowered her weapon. “*I came within a heartbeat of shooting your damn ass. Which is supposed to be. In. The. Car!*”

DL lowered his hands and crept to press his back against the crates next to Grace.

“*What’s happening, Gracie?*” Danny said from the top of the crates.

“*DL is just trying to get himself shot by following us. Now I have another person to keep track of, dammit!*”

“*DL, you are not helping me out by being in here. I’m trying to*

scope out the situation before Billy and Anthony get here,” she whispered in his ear.

DL met her angry gaze with a stubborn one of his own. “I’m not just gonna sit on the sidelines, Grace. Do what you have to, but I’m here to help rescue Celeste.”

“God save me from men with hero complexes,” she said under her breath, while motioning DL to stay where he was and be quiet.

*“Danny, what do you and Sabra see?”*

*“A huge open space. There are large portable lights all pointing at a table of some sort, and there’s a girl on the table!”*

*“Is she moving?”* Grace asked.

*“No. It doesn’t look like she’s conscious. She’s on her back. Her hands and feet are roped down and there’s a rag tied across her mouth.”*

*“Where’s the Glamour?”* Grace asked.

*“He’s right by the girl. I’d recognize his aura anywhere! He’s messing around with the ropes tying her down. There are some knives on a small table next to him.”* Danny gulped. *“They all have blood stains on them.”*

*“He ain’t finish with her,”* Sabra interjected. *“He waitin’ for her wake up, just like the other girls.”*

*“Jesus!”* Grace’s stomach clenched.

DL leaned close and whispered into her ear. “What’s going on? What’s happening?”

“I need you to stay quiet. I’m talking to Sabra and she is letting me know what’s going on out there. I can’t focus on what’s she’s telling me if you keep interrupting. Stay there and stay quiet.” She gave him a small shove with her free hand.

*“What else do you see, Danny?”*

*“There are these weird mounds all over the place. Looks like piles of concrete or something. At least two dozen all together.”*

*“He do that to the girls,” Sabra supplied. “Pours concrete and shit on them—says he saving them. See, that me over there.”*

*“Gracie,” Danny said. “I see what Sabra’s talking about. It looks like the girls aren’t only buried under the concrete.” Sounding sick, he continued. “He’s got them posed under there.”*

*“Posed?”*

*“Yeah, like mannequins. Sabra’s mound has concrete-covered arms sticking out of the slab—arms with no hands. Each of the slabs has a different body part sticking out of them—legs, arms, faces. I think I’m going to be sick.”*

*“Easy, Danny. I think you’re safe there. I don’t think ghosts can vomit.”*

*“Yeah, well tell that to my stomach,” Danny moaned back.*

*“Where is this ‘it,’ this ‘her,’ he’s making?” Grace asked, trying to get them back on track.*

*“There,” Sabra said, “that’s it under the big light over there.”*

*“The creature is standing in the center of a pentagram in a cleared space. There are objects laid at each point and at the intersection of the lines. It’s too far away for me to see what they are.”*

*“What about the creature? What does it look like?”*

*“Well, it’s naked and looks almost human. Gross! It’s got a woman’s body, but its face isn’t complete. It only has a nose and mouth—it’s missing eyes and lips and ears. The other body parts are a mishmash of different sizes and skin colors. And where the parts connect, it’s like they were melted together somehow. I think he’s building a female Frankenstein’s monster.”*

Danny seemed amazed despite his revulsion.

*“Yeah,” Sabra agreed. “As he cuttin’ us, he tellin’ us we fuckin special, that we goin’ be part of his ‘grand creation’. He one sick motha fucka; he makin’ a monster.”*

Grace had heard enough.

“Billy,” she whispered through her mic. “I need you guys in here, now! We’ve found Celeste and the Glamour, and he’s getting ready to torture her!”

DL tried to barge past her, and Grace had to restrain him by barring his way with her arm. She glared at him. “Follow my lead, and stay out of the way, dammit!”

Grace crept to the edge of the crate and leaned to peer around the wood. She gave her eyes time to adjust to the bright lights in the center of the room.

“Where are you guys?”

“We’re here. Moving into position now,” Billy’s whisper came back in her ear.

All at once, Anthony’s shout echoed through the warehouse.

“*Vietato! E’ vietato!*”

“God dammit, Anthony, what the fuck are you doing?” Billy shouted from other side of the warehouse.

“*What the hell?*” Grace ground her teeth.

“*Must be our diversion.*” Danny slid down the crates to join her on the floor.

Anthony ran toward the monster, shouting. The Glamour stood up from where he was bent fixing the ropes on the table holding Celeste. With an inarticulate cry he grabbed a wicked looking curved blade from the nearby table. He reached out with the knife to cut across Celeste’s thigh and darted to intercept Anthony.

“Billy, I’ll get the girl. You get the Glamour.”

“On it.” Billy headed toward the growing action near the woman-thing.

Grace ran toward Celeste, her gun raised as she scanned the table and the surrounding area. DL followed right after her, heading toward Celeste without paying attention to anything else going on in the warehouse.

She trusted Anthony and Billy would handle the situation while she and DL got Celeste to a safe place. As she neared the table, she hesitated before she detected the shallow rise and fall of Celeste's chest.

"She's still breathing," she said to DL as he stepped in to help the girl.

The cut the Glamour had made in Celeste's thigh was deep and bleeding badly. DL grabbed a piece of rope laying on the ground next to the table. He wrapped it around Celeste's cut thigh, tightening it into a tourniquet and tying it off with a strong knot.

While DL was busy tending to Celeste's wound, Grace bent over and pulled on the ropes tying her to the table. She used one hand, holding her pistol ready in the other. They were resistant to her tugging, and she growled in frustration. She gave up on trying to force the ropes.

Instead, she reached down and pulled the knife from her boot, avoiding the bloodied knives left behind by the Glamour. She dashed from one corner of the table to the next cutting ropes loose while keeping one eye on the surroundings.

Grace was distracted from her efforts by a change in the shouting and Danny's frightened voice crying out "*Holy shit! Mrs. Frankenstein is moving!*"

She glanced up. The monster was now animated and grappling with Anthony. It caught him by the throat in both hands. In response, Billy shot it. All the while, the Glamour danced in a frenzy just outside the pentagram, cheering on the chaos.

Grace jerked her attention back to Celeste. DL had already removed all the ropes that had been tying her down.

"We need to get Celeste to safety so I can help Billy and Anthony."

"Help me lift her so the tourniquet doesn't come loose. I'll carry her over to the crates to get her out of the way."

She helped DL shift the unconscious body to the edge of the table

and pull the girl into his arms. He grunted as he shifted her weight, and Grace followed him as he moved at a rapid shuffle to the wall of crates they hid behind earlier.

“*Sabra!*” Grace shouted which caused the ghost to appear next to her. “*How do we stop the thing?*”

“*Fuck if I know,*” Sabra said, fear clear on her face.

“*How did they stop Frankenstein’s monster?*” Danny prompted.

“*They didn’t,*” Grace said. “*The monster got away with a promise to burn himself to ensure his destruction. We’ll try that. We’ll see how this thing deals with fire.*”

## Chapter 31

“Do you have your lighter?” Grace looked down at DL as he knelt by Celeste, checking on her wound.

“Lighter?” He turned to her with a distracted look. “Yeah sure, right here in my pocket. Why?”

“Give it to me. I need to create my own diversion.”

DL dug through his pockets for the lighter he always carried. Finding it with a satisfied grunt, he handed it to Grace before turning his attention back to Celeste.

“Get Celeste to the car,” she told him. “I need you safe and out of the way.”

*“Danny, go with them.”*

*“Got it!”*

Not waiting for DL to follow her instructions, she headed around the crates to the chaos on the other side.

Across the floor, the Glamour shouted encouragement to the monster as it continued its strangle hold on Anthony, who was turning blue. Billy had stopped trying to shoot the thing, which was having no effect, and was angling to get past the monster. As Billy approached him, the Glamour turned from the monster to grin and waggle the knife in his hand at Billy.

With the Glamour distracted, Grace scooped up a piece of discarded clothing as she passed the torture table and headed toward the others. She stopped a few feet from the monster and lit the lighter, holding the flame to an edge of the blouse. It refused to catch at first, and Grace’s frustration rose. Forcing the flame against the material, she glanced over at Anthony, whose face was now dark blue face and whose futile kicking and punching against the thing was slowing.

Finally, the blouse caught fire. Grace moved in as close to the



monster as she dared and tossed the burning shirt on the back of the thing's head. She positioned it as far away from Anthony as she could and still start the monster on fire. The flaming material landed right on target, and the hair caught first, forming a halo around the grotesque, half-human face. The creature turned its empty eyes toward Grace, although no sound came from its gaping lip-less mouth.

“No!” the Glamour screamed.

Turning, he dropped the curved knife he had been using to threaten Billy. He went to the creature, beating his hands against the flames, only managing to fan them and burn himself badly.

The flames now engulfed the entire head of the creature and were progressing down its body, but it did not try to quench the flames. It stood in eerie silence, continuing to throttle Anthony. It was oblivious to its own destruction, ignoring the smell of burning flesh growing stronger by the minute.

As the flames progressed, the thing seemed to register pain, and it dropped Anthony to bat at its own head.

With Anthony released, Billy raised his pistol. “Stop!”

*Shit!* Damn Billy's sense of justice. Getting the Glamour's attention was the last thing he should have done.

Grace bent down and grabbed Anthony's limp form under his arms. There were several gunshots from the other side of the creature as she retreated to drag Anthony away. The pentagram was marred during Anthony's attack, and now it was almost obliterated. Setting her pistol beside her, she checked for his pulse and, finding none, started CPR.

As she kept up her rhythm on Anthony's chest, the monster went up in flames all at once, despite not being clothed in obvious flammable material. As the creature fell to its knees, a sinking pillar of flame, two figures struggled beyond the smoke and light cast off by the fire.

Grace turned her attention back to the still unbreathing body beneath

her. “Damn it, Anthony! What the hell were you thinking? Come on, idiot! Breathe!” She continued working on him as the seconds stretched into minutes, trying to maintain an even rhythm despite the distractions.

At last, he let out a weak cough and tried to roll over onto his side.

“Stay here!” She grabbed her pistol and jumped to her feet.

She dashed toward the creature. It was now a burning heap on the floor, its movements like a dying bug trapped on its back, scrabbling but finding no purchase. There was only a single figure on the ground behind it, unmoving.

*Shit!*

While she was working on the unconscious Anthony she left Billy with no protection from the Glamour’s mind controlling ability. She raced past the burning creature to find Billy lying unconscious with a piece of concrete next to his bleeding head. Grace cast about, searching for the Glamour. But he was gone.

## Chapter 32

Grace stared helplessly down at Billy. She jerked herself back into motion and pulled off her shirt and knelt beside his bleeding head. She tried to keep his neck as immobile as possible while making sure the cloth covered his whole scalp. The material was soon saturated on the right side of his head where she felt a sickening dent in his skull. She applied as much pressure as she could without doing more damage to the area.

*“Danny, I need you!”* The tears rolled freely down her cheeks.

*“Coming!”* His voice came from a distance near the crates.

Danny appeared at Grace’s side, a gasp escaping him. *“Oh my god! What happened to Billy?”* He dropped down beside her.

*“The Glamour hit him in the head with that piece of cement.”* She motioned with her head to the brick a few feet to the side. *“He got away after knocking Billy out.”*

*“Shit, Gracie. What are we going to do?”*

Grace stopped her crying and focused on her brother. *“Look at me, Danny.”* She waited for his eyes to move off Billy and meet hers. *“There’s not much time. Billy needs to get to a hospital and get stabilized. He’s losing lots of blood. There’s no telling what damage the Glamour did when he hit Billy.”*

Keeping one hand to the side of Billy’s head, she held out her other hand to Danny.

*“I need you to manifest and take the knives the Glamour was using. Hide them somewhere in the building where they’ll be safe. Ask Sabra to help you find a place, or make a place.”*

*“But the ghosts will see I can manifest—”* Danny started to object.

Grace interrupted him. *“There’s no time to argue. I need the knives in a safe place. I can read them later to find the Glamour. I can’t do it myself*

*and help Billy, too. It's our only connection to the Glamour, and I don't want whoever shows up next to take them. We have to be the ones in control of them. Do you understand?"*

"Yes, Gracie." Danny grasped her hand.

With his acknowledgment, she concentrated on their clasped hands. Like when she charged the crystals at home, she imagined her energy flowing from her into Danny. In an instant, Danny went from a ghost only she could see to a corporeal boy.

"Hurry! I don't want Anthony to wake up and see you. I think we'd better try to keep you a secret for a bit longer." She put both hands on the bandage around Billy's head.

Danny rose to his feet and scooped up the curved knife the Glamour dropped in his efforts to save the monster. After grabbing the first knife, he ran back to collect the rest of the weapons from where they lay on the small table.

Grace glanced up to see him speaking with Sabra. He looked over to her, and she gave him an encouraging nod. After few minutes of talking, they disappeared behind the crates together, becoming lost in the dark shadows.

*One problem solved.* She sighed in relief, sniffing at the tears. *Now to get medical help for Billy.*

"Anthony!" she shouted.

He'd only had a short time for recovery, but she hoped he had moved from barely breathing to conscious in the last few minutes. She needed his help getting an ambulance there, and fast.

"Anthony, you fucking Paranorm, wake up and get over here!" she screamed at his unmoving form, desperation giving her voice volume.

He groaned and roused himself to standing. After taking a few seconds to gain his balance, he stumbled to her side. "By the powers! Is he alive?" He dropped down beside her to touch Billy's chest.

"He is for now, but for not much longer if we don't get him to the

hospital ASAP. I'm afraid to move him without the proper equipment, but we can't risk exposing the Paranorms by revealing what's happened here. And we need help for Celeste, as well. Can you get help from anyone who won't put the Paranorms or Billy at risk?"

Anthony hesitated for a second, his hand tightening on the fabric of Billy's shirt.

"Yes, yes, of course," he assured her. "There are Paranorm paramedics at the hospitals for these types of emergencies. Let me call Nicco, and someone will be here in a few minutes."

He pulled a cell phone out of his back pocket and hit the speed dial, rubbing his throat as he waited for the connection. Nicco picked up after a few rings, and Anthony provided the quick and to the point version to get the help on their way.

*Problem two solved.* Grace followed Billy's breathing, relieved to see he could still breathe on his own.

Anthony finished the phone call and came to sit opposite of her. He reached out to put his hand on Billy's arm. "Is there anything else I can do to help Billy?"

"Just help me keep an eye on his breathing and make sure he doesn't move around. I'll let you know if I need you to spell me on keeping compression on the head wounds."

They settled into a more comfortable position to wait for the ambulance.

*Now to figure out how to solve problem three—the Glamour.*

## Chapter 33

Grace rose from the waiting room's uncomfortable plastic chair when Mrs. Winiarksi and several of Billy's brothers walked through the ER entrance.

Mrs. Winiarksi spotted her right away and hurried to meet Grace. "Where's Billy? What have the doctors said?"

"He's still in surgery, Mrs. W.," Grace said. "Nothing much has changed since I first called you."

"Eric, you go to the nurse's station and find out if there's an update on Billy," Mrs. Winiarksi said. "Tim, you and Sam go over to the cafeteria to find something for us to eat. It's going to be a long night and I won't have people dealing with this on an empty stomach."

Grace led Mrs. Winiarksi to a row of empty seats. Billy's mother sat down in one of the more sturdy chairs and settled her purse in her lap.

"Mrs. Winiarksi, these are my friends Anthony and DL. They've been helping Billy and me with the case."

"I'm sorry we had to meet under these circumstances, Ma'am," DL said.

"Unfortunately, these circumstances come as part of being the mother of police officers. But it normally happens when they're on official police business." She eyed Grace.

"DL, why don't you go check on how Celeste is doing? I'll send Jennifer up to her room once she gets here," Grace said.

He reached out to squeeze her shoulder. "Thanks, Grace. I'd like to be there when she wakes up. Call me with any news about Billy." DL walked to the elevators at the end of the hall.

Anthony had shrunk down in his chair, but Mrs. Winiarksi turned to him next. "Tony, was it?"

“Anthony, ma’am.”

“Anthony, I appreciate you being here to support Grace and my Billy. Would you mind giving Grace and me a moment alone?”

“My pleasure, ma’am.” He shifted to an open space in the hallway, where he began pacing.

Mrs. Winiarksi turned her full attention on Grace. “You were intentionally vague on the phone. I want you to tell me what happened tonight.”

“I can’t give you many details on the case.”

“I’m not asking about the case. I’m asking you to tell me what happened to Billy tonight.”

Grace took a deep breath to settle her nerves.

“We were down in the abandoned linen district looking for a kidnapped girl to stop her from being murdered. Billy got into a fight with the perp, and the perp ended up smashing his head with a brick.”

“Where were the rest of you at the time?”

“DL and I were taking care of the kidnapped girl — the perp had stabbed her right when we got there. And Anthony was dealing with the perp’s... uh... accomplice when Billy was attacked.”

“I take it this perp was very strong to have over-come my Billy.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Grace brushed a piece of fuzz from her jeans, waiting for the next question to hit, but she was saved from further interrogation by Eric’s return from the nurses’ station.

“The doctors have finished the surgery. They’re putting Billy into an induced coma. The nurse explained it as a way of shutting down the energy needs of his brain to give it time to heal without the body performing ‘radical triage’ by shutting off blood flow to the damaged parts. It’s supposed to protect the damaged areas as the brain heals and the swelling goes down to a safe level.”

Mrs. Winiarksi paled at the news and closed her eyes a moment.

When she opened them, she was all business again. “Eric, you and I are going down to the chapel to pray. Grace, send his brothers to us once they get back with the food. It won’t hurt for God to hear a chorus of Winiarksi’s prayers for Billy.”

“I’ll do that, Mrs. W.” Grace sighed, relieved to be avoiding further questions about the night’s disaster.

“*Danny?*” She reached out for her brother’s presence as Billy’s mother and brother walked away.

*“Right here, Gracie.”*

She turned to see him standing beside her with tears in his eyes. “*Is Billy, going to be okay? That whole ‘induced coma’ thing sounds scary.*”

*“I don’t know, kiddo. But the doctors are doing the best they can for him and the whole Winiarksi clan will be praying for him. Why don’t you go up to Celeste’s room and keep an eye on her and DL for me.”*

*“Are you trying to find something for me to do to keep my mind off Billy?”*

*“Maybe, but you’ll also be helping to keep my mind off Celeste while I’m here waiting to get the next update on Billy.”*



## Chapter 34

A nurse came in to check on Billy's vitals, and Grace got out of the way to let her do her job. She made a quick trip to the restroom and stopped by the vending machine to grab two candy bars for herself and Anthony.

When she returned to the room, Anthony was releasing Billy's hand and taking a step further down the bed toward his feet. Guilt passed over his face before it returned to the stoic visage he had maintained all night.

Grace handed Anthony one of the candy bars and made no comment on what she saw. She motioned to the bruises on his throat. "How are you?"

"Doing better," he said, his voice a rough whisper. "How are you doing?"

"I feel like crap," she said, looking down at Billy's still form.

"My mind just keeps going in circles. How I should have never gotten Billy in this situation in the first place. And being pissed off the Glamour got away a second time. And how I won't ever be able to protect DL's girls from their predator." She rubbed her forehead with one hand.

"Round and round again. I can't help replaying what happened last night in my head. Second guessing myself for every decision, wondering if changing anything would have prevented Billy from getting hurt."

"Grace, we all decided to go after the Glamour knowing it would be dangerous. Billy, too."

"Yeah, but he wouldn't be here now if I hadn't asked him for help."

"I understand how you feel. But beating yourself up over it will not change anything. Right now, you need to focus your energy on Billy getting better and put the negative thoughts behind you."

"Easier said than done. Especially since there's nothing I can actually do right now for him."

"The doctors put Billy into an induced coma to give his brain time to

heal. We need to give it a little time and be patient.”

Grace sighed heavily. “I’m not good with the whole patience thing, but I guess I can concentrate on that.

“Billy’s family should be back soon,” Grace said. “They’ll want space in the room to be with Billy. But once they return, can you stay outside the door in case the Glamour comes back? I need to get back to the warehouse to see what else I can find out. I’ll introduce you to Billy’s family as a friend of ours and tell them you’ll be staying here while I go work on the case.”

“You think the Glamour could find him—would come here after what happened tonight?”

“I’m not sure.” The exhaustion and worry made her tone terser than she intended. “I’m afraid we pissed him off tonight, pushed him over some edge. I’m not going to take a chance on Billy getting hurt worse.”

As she finished, she reached out to hold Billy’s hand again—not that he would feel it, but the warmth of his hand in hers reassured her.

“You two are much more than friends.” The catch in his voice drew Grace’s attention away from Billy’s hand to the dejection on Anthony’s face.

All at once, it clicked for her. The guilt she saw when she caught Anthony holding Billy’s hand earlier. The times since that first meeting as Billy and Anthony had seemed to get along better and better.

“Anthony, do you have feelings for Billy?”

His face got red as he refused to meet her eyes. “I... that’s a very personal thing to ask.”

“You were the one observing who was more than friends, first.”

“What if I do?” Anthony said, sucking in his cheeks.

“When I first met you at the theater, you were anything but friendly to non-Paranoms. And you come from a world where Norms are poorly regarded. Yet here you are standing there saying you’ve fallen for Billy?”

Anthony looked miserable but nodded. “It first started as physical

attraction. But during the nights Billy and I spent together on the stakeout, it became something more. It got stronger the longer the case went on. The events of the last few days and almost losing him made it all the more real for me.”

A spike of jealousy followed by a hollow fear gutted Grace. The jealousy she squelched as pure silliness, but the fear was something too legitimate to ignore.

“To be honest, I don’t know how to protect Billy. I don’t see a way to keep him out of this mess with as much as he knows about my abilities and now the whole Paranorm world. I can’t see how to keep him from being drawn in deeper along with me.”

*Ironic my new family is turning out to pose this much danger to my current one.* Grace weighed her decision before she spoke. “And if Billy is pulled into this world with me, it would be better for him to have an ally beyond myself. He’ll be safer connected with someone as important as you, who’s a close associate of Nicco. I can’t guarantee his safety by myself, but you could help.”

Anthony began to speak, but Grace held up her hand to stop him.

“You’ve changed since our first meeting and I want to believe the change is permanent. Maybe it will be if Billy is part of the reason for it.”

“He is a big part of it,” Anthony admitted, his voice earnest. “Billy, DL, and you have forced me to change the way I think about Norms and even *Aperto Rotto*. Especially Billy. I was starting to believe he felt the same about me. But seeing you with him now, I wonder if I was fooling myself. I don’t want to come between you and Billy.” He hung his head, staring down at his feet.

“Anthony,” she began, getting him to look her in the eyes. “Billy and I’ve known each other for over twenty years—since we were kids. He’s my family—like an older brother and best friend rolled into one. He is not, and never will be, anything more.”

Anthony's eyes searched her face, his face naked in its hope she was speaking the truth.

"You are telling me you and Billy are not together... not dating?"

"No, we're not. I wasn't paying attention before now. But what you've told me about feeling a mutual attraction makes sense. He's at least grown to enjoy your company. If he's interested in more than that, I'd be the next happiest person, after him, for it to happen."

"So it doesn't bother you if Billy is gay? If I am interested in him?"

Grace chuckled. "I figured out he's gay a long time ago, so you aren't telling me something I don't already know. But you need to understand Billy's family does *not* know. Mr. All-American-Athlete here never came out to his family or friends.

"He keeps tight control on his emotions in that respect, so most people don't pick up on anything. Even if he *is* attracted to you, I'm not sure whether he'll act on it or not. There's a ton at stake for him if he does."

Anthony gazed down at Billy as he considered Grace's disclosure. He spoke in such a quiet voice it was a strain for Grace to hear his words. "Well, my family is aware I am gay. That, at least, is not a problem."

He peered up at her with a self-deprecating smile. "However, they do *not* look favorably on having a relationship with Norms. It is actually forbidden, even if you fall in love with one."

Grace's heart went out to Anthony and Billy as Anthony wiped away the tears that formed in his eyes during his admission.

"Okay, so there'll be issues if you both want to act on your feelings. But right now, we need to focus on Billy surviving his injuries and making a full recovery. Like you said, channel all those emotions into thoughts of Billy getting better, and we'll find out where this takes you guys. Regardless of what happens, you both have my blessings and my full support."

"Thank you, Grace," Anthony said. "It means a great deal that you are on our side. Now it is probably best if I take up my 'station' outside for

guard duty before Billy's family gets back."

As Anthony moved to leave the room, Grace put her hand on his arm to stop him.

"There's one thing that's been bothering me since we got to the warehouse and discovered what the Glamour was doing. Sabra said he was taking pieces of each of the girls to create the woman-thing we burned." She brushed her chin with her finger.

"How is that possible? If Paranorms have only one power, how was the Glamour creating such a thing? He has mind control abilities, but this is something way beyond that, right?"

Anthony shifted his feet before answering her. "To be honest, I have no idea. He should not be capable of doing what he did with the creature. The question is whether he is special, like you, in having multiple abilities. Or whether there is another person we have not suspected until now who is helping him do this to the girls."

"We aren't hunting one person? There's someone else involved in this mess?" The sense of dread lurking in the back of her mind rushed forward when she said what she feared out loud.

"Yes, that is a real possibility."

"Then is there anything else you can tell me that can help at this point?"

"I would say you need to go back and speak with Nicco about what we found. I have given him a rough idea of what happened and can update him now on the details. But your best chance for figuring out what is going on is to talk with him yourself."

"That's what I was afraid you'd say," she muttered to herself as she released Anthony's arm.

## Chapter 35

Viora stood at the wall of windows that made up one side of the penthouse office. She stared out into the night, eyes surveying the lights of the city below her. The events that had occurred the last few days tainted her usual satisfaction with the view and her place above it.

She forced herself to stand in one place, composed rather than pacing the floor. The anger raged inside her like a maelstrom. She could hold it in check only by her iron will, developed over decades of ruling The Family.

A knock at the door pulled her attention away from her deliberations. Robyn was right on time, as usual. Gregory crossed the room at a measured pace to answer the door.

Viora took a seat in the lone chair positioned on top the dais. She allowed no one to sit in her presence, here. As soon as he let Robyn inside, Gregory left the room and closed the door.

She smiled to herself as Robyn traversed the room to stand in front of her. His scared expression made it clear he understood what it meant to be called to meet with her here. A formal meeting in her penthouse rather than a casual meeting in the office meant she was not pleased with him.

Viora waited him out, enjoying the fear pouring off of him as he stood, wringing his hands. These moments of watching others cower in her presence were what she enjoyed most about being head of The Family. Having people at your beck and call was one thing, having them at the whim of your will... intoxicating.

After a time, she grew bored with his cringing. “Robyn, how long have you been mine?”

Robyn swallowed, forehead wrinkling. “You bought me from the Klavkov family forty years ago, *Mia Regina*.”

“They told me that your usefulness would be limited. But you proved

yourself worthy to me during that time, helping me for these years of planning, scheming, plotting, and manipulating.”

He stood still, blinking as if unsure whether to respond to the compliment.

“I have been working for years with deliberate patience and skill from behind the scenes to bring all the pieces together. And I am close to attaining my goal of forcing the other Families to bow to my will.”

Viora’s hands clenched the arm rests of her chair.

“But this *Aperto Rotto* has become involved, and your extra-curricular activities are no longer secret.”

She ignored Robyn’s look of confusion, her anger battling her will to contain it. “I thought that limiting Niccolo’s ability to help the girl would move things in my favor. But at this crucial time, things are not turning out as I planned. Instead of jumping at the chance to become part of the Paranorm family, she seems determined to defy both the Paranorms and The Family. She insists on pursuing the disappearances you’ve created through unofficial channels. Normally I would applaud such dogged commitment, even admire it. But her efforts are getting in the way of my goals.”

The cords on her neck stood out as her nostrils flared. “None of this would be a problem if you were clever enough to keep your extracurricular activities a secret. Your entertainments are getting out of hand. Your sheer lack of control is infuriating.”

Robyn raised a shaking hand to her. “*Mia Regina—*”

She cut him off with a growl. “I let you take your enjoyments as a reward for how effective you remained to me these past years. You are integral to my plans, but they demand your abilities and your role stay hidden. I cannot afford to let your indiscretions bring the Norms’ attention to The Family. Nor bring the other Families’ attention to what I am trying to accomplish.” Her lips pinched into a thin line before she forced them to relax.

“It is inconvenient enough that the Paranorms are aware that a Glamour is in the city amongst them and preying on Norms. It is an embarrassment that the West Coast branch of The Family now knows of the situation.”

With a snarl, Viora continued. “I will not have The Family perceive me as weak and unable to control the Paranorms, especially one who is using his power and putting The Family at risk with his clumsiness. They believe these indiscretions are acts of a rogue Paranorm, but that will not last long if you continue to expose yourself. Your entertainments are much too public. They must stop.”

Her lips pulled back, barring her teeth, as she forced herself to wait for Robyn’s response.

Robyn frowned, rubbing his face. “My entertainments, *Mia Regina*? I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you mean.” He appeared worried that he was unable to understand her.

“The Norms, Robyn. The Norms you have been playing with. I understand how entertaining it can be to make these creatures dance to your whims, maybe engage in a little pleasurable torture of a few of them. They are there for our pleasure, are they not? But too many Paranorms and too many in The Family are now aware of these activities. They aren’t connecting you to them yet, but we can’t take the risk they will. Stop. Now.” Her voice was icy and low, but she made sure there was no mistaking the command in it.

Robyn continued to look confused and opened his mouth to say something more. But Viora’s patience with him had come to an end. Putting her plans in jeopardy, providing an opening for The Family to question her competence and authority, and now denying his actions to her face?

“This conversation is over. We will not have another one on this topic. Go home and stay there until I need you again.”

With that dismissal, Viora rose. She remained impassive as his



expression changed from confusion to rage and his eyes changed from brown to gray. The contest of wills was ended quickly, and he stormed out the door.

With a smile of satisfaction, she returned to her view of the city.

## Chapter 36

Gustav stood in the early twilight shadows, scrutinizing Grace's townhouse from across the street. He seethed at how the girl had ruined so much of his planning.

"You're sure this is her home?" he asked.

"Yes. I told you I would find out where she lives. And look, there is her car with the right license plate, too." Robyn pointed to Grace's car, parked in front of the townhouse.

Robyn had gathered several interesting facts about the *Aperto Rotto* in the short time since the disaster at the warehouse, including her home address. He could be quite resourceful, given the right motivation.

"Why are we here?" Robyn asked.

"Because I want to leave a message for Miss Bishop. A personal message."

"And you needed my help to make sure no one sees or remembers you while you do it?"

"Yes, but it looks like your abilities aren't needed beyond helping me buy her gifts unnoticed." Gustav gestured to the empty street.

"Why just leave a message? Why don't you do something more if you're so angry with her?"

Gustav ground his teeth.

"Because I'm waiting to decide how best to deal with Miss Bishop. I may be able to use her to my advantage, still make my plans come together. In the meantime, I want her to see that I know where she lives and where she is vulnerable. I want her to start second guessing herself, making mistakes. We'll see how much The Family and the Paranorms admire this *Aperto Rotto* once I'm done with her."

Robyn shrank back as Gustav finished his tirade.

“Be on your way, little Robyn. This is a message I will deliver myself.”

Without stopping to check if Robyn had obeyed him, Gustav stepped out of the shadows and crossed the street.

## Chapter 37

Grace was stepping out of the shower when the doorbell rang. She had stopped by the apartment for a quick shower and change of clothes before her meeting with Nicco. Whoever it was, they would need to come back another time. She had way too much on her plate today to deal with anyone.

Grace wanted to get to the conversation with Nicco as soon as possible. She was sure he was keeping things from her. She would get real answers from him, no matter how many readings it took.

She'd dried her hair and gotten dressed by the time the doorbell rang again.

*What is it with these people!* She hurried down the stairs to throw open the front door.

A startled Sophie on the threshold was poised to push the doorbell one more time.

"Oh, Grace!" Sophie said in surprise. "I wasn't sure anyone was at home."

"Yes, I am. But not for long." Grace tried not to be short with her friend in her anxiousness to get to the theater.

"I was stopping by to drop off some gifts," Sophie began in a bright voice, her natural lightheartedness reappearing. "I spoke to Marcella, and she agreed I could bring these to you." Sophie held out several tissue-paper-wrapped bundles.

"Marcella?"

"She's the matriarch of our Paranorm family," Sophie explained, stepping around Grace to come inside. "Next to Nicco, she's the most important person you'll need to deal with now that you'll be part of the family."

Grace sighed as she closed the door behind her friend. It looked like her trip to the theater would be delayed while she found out what had Sophie all excited. “Uh, part of the family?”

Sophie looked up from where she was laying the bundles on the living room table. “Of course!” she replied. “Once Nicco makes your Paranorm status official, Marcella will make you an honorary member of the family. Anthony and I both spoke to her about it. She promised she would, and she always keeps her word.” Sophie busied herself with unwrapping the bundles.

Competing thoughts raced through Grace’s head. *A member of Sophie’s family, even an honorary one? Sophie and Anthony both spoke on her behalf? Nicco needed to make it official?* “That would make us something like, um, cousins?” she asked.

Sophie giggled. “Yes, something like that. Come here and help me with these.” She gestured to what she brought with her.

Grace moved to the table where several bundles of what appeared to be dried weeds held together with thin blue satin ribbons lay. Some of the bundles even had tiny bells attached to the ends of the ribbons.

“What are these for?” Grace asked.

“These are to put up around the house—in the windows and at the front and back doors. The Norms know them as good luck charms for the home and family. But the particular combination of plants, ribbons, and bells show you’re a friend of our Paranorm family.” She smoothed out a ribbon on one of the bundles.

“My family gives them to Norms who are particularly friendly to Paranorms. Even if they’re not aware it’s recognition for their openness in dealing with us. We tell them it’s an old family tradition brought over from the ‘old country,’ and they’re happy to put them up in their homes and businesses. It’s a way to let Paranorms know who supports our family and who we like.”

“We aren’t announcing I’m a Paranorm with these? We’re only saying I’m a decent person and the family likes me?” Grace repeated to confirm her understanding.

“Yes, that’s it. I asked Marcella for permission to bring other charms to show you’re a Paranorm to the rest of our family. They would also act as wards to keep Paranorms from entering the house without your permission. But she said we needed to wait for Nicco’s official acknowledgment of your status before you’re allowed to have them.”

“Wait! There are charms to keep Paranorms out my home? Does that mean they might break in without them?” Grace was *not* happy thinking about the consequences of what that could mean, particularly with the Glamour still on the loose.

“Paranorms rarely go around willy-nilly breaking into people’s homes. But in your situation, they might get curious about who you are and not be as well-mannered as to leave you to your privacy. These ‘friendship’ charms won’t ward your home, but they’ll be a reminder to Paranorms to be on their best behavior and be polite about your home and space.”

“And where do you get these charms? Do you make them yourself?”

“It’s an important part of the ritual of sharing for a Paranorm to make the charms themselves. I made these for you and Danny.” Sophie looked at her hands before returning her gaze to meet Grace’s. “And the protection wards we get from The Family.”

“I take it you mean Nicco’s Family.”

“Yes.” Sophie shifted from one foot to another with the direction of the conversation.

“Do you have time before you go to help me put these up in the house?”

Grace forced the impatience arising from Sophie’s request from her mind. Her friend had spoken once again on her behalf. The least she could do would be to help her put up the charms. A few minutes delay wouldn’t make

a big difference in solving the problems she needed to discuss with Nicco. And it would give her a chance to ask Sophie about something that was sitting in the back of her mind since the last meeting with him—something she thought would be safe for Sophie to talk about.

As they hung the charms, Grace cleared her throat. “You know the case I’m working on with Anthony?”

“Yes. I’m sorry to hear what happened to your friend. Anthony said he was staying with him for you while you keep working the case.”

Grace fiddled with the flowers in the arrangement she was holding. She was confident Billy’s family and Anthony would call her as soon as his status changed. The doctors weren’t expecting anything to shift for a few days. That meant she could focus on the tasks at hand and put her energy there, rather than with Billy at the hospital.

“My friend, DL, is the one who asked me to take on the case. When I mentioned he was a tattoo artist, Nicco said something intriguing. He told me I should be careful about getting tattoos because they carry special meanings to Paranorms.”

Sophie stopped in the middle of hanging a charm, her eyes searching Grace’s face. “Is that all he said—they hold special meaning to us?”

“Yes.” Grace mentally crossed her fingers behind her back. “That’s all he had time to say before our meeting finished.”

Sophie stared down at the charm in her hand, her fingers playing with the string tying it to the bundle, refusing to meet Grace’s eyes.

“Is this something you can tell me about?”

Sophie cleared her throat, still refusing to look up from the charm. “I would like to tell you more, but I’ve already gotten in trouble for telling you too much earlier.”

Nicco must have kept his word about speaking to Sophie’s family. Grace reached out to still Sophie’s busy fingers. “I’m so sorry that revealing the Paranorm world to me got you into trouble with Nicco. I didn’t realize I

was putting you at risk by asking for your help.”

Sophie looked up at Grace, biting her lip.

“But what you shared with me has helped Danny and me already. I’ve passed Nicco’s tests, and I guess you’d say I’m ‘on retainer’ with him. That pretty much puts me smack dab in the middle of the Paranorm world, don’t you think?”

Sophie gave a hesitant nod.

“But I have a lot of catching up to do to understand how this whole ‘being a Paranorm and part of The Family’ thing works. You gave me the warning about not pissing Nicco off—protecting my powers and Danny. I would have blundered horribly at my first meeting with Nicco if I hadn’t had your warning. I’m hoping you can mentor me some more about other aspects of the Paranorm world so I can avoid similar mistakes. Nicco didn’t give me much of anything to go on, but since he mentioned the tattoos, it must be important. Can you tell me more?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Sophie set aside the charm and faced Grace with her hands clasped tightly in front of her. “Okay, Grace. I brought you into this world, I should at least give you some pointers on how to make your way in it. Each Paranorm receives a tattoo when they choose the person in The Family who will be their patron, for lack of a better term.”

Sophie held up her hand when Grace tried to interrupt with her next question. “A Paranorm gets to choose for themselves which member of The Family they’ll work with once they reach their sixteenth birthday. We call it the *‘scelta di vita’* or ‘life choice.’ This is a permanent alignment, and to represent the lifelong relationship, each Paranorm will receive a tattoo of their particular Family member’s symbol. Nicco’s symbol is the raven, and each Paranorm working for him has a raven tattooed on their right shoulder.”

As she was describing this, Sophie pulled down the collar of her shirt to expose her right shoulder and reveal a small raven tattoo. This raven was about one quarter the size of Grace’s tattoo, and it was of a bird in a standing



pose instead of in flight.

*Oh shit!* Grace forced herself to focus on the right questions to ask. “Are they all like yours, these raven tattoos?”

“No. There are three types of tattoos.” Sophie released her shirt collar. “The tattoo I have is the one you get when you make your ‘*scelta di vita*.’ Every Paranorm working for Nicco has this one.

“The second tattoo is only for those Paranorms who hold a special position with The Family member they serve. It’s a position of honor and respect, and with it, they receive a change to their tattoo—to add wings to put the raven in flight. We call it ‘*ottenere le ali*’ or ‘getting the wings.’”

Grace’s heart skipped a bit.

“Does anyone in your family have the wings?”

“The only ones who do, and are still living and working for Nicco, are Marcella and Anthony’s father. Anthony is anxious to earn a pair for himself, but he’s still too young for it.”

“And the third tattoo?” Grace prompted.

“The third tattoo is a mystery to my generation for the most part. The rumor is it’s a flying raven carrying a sacred scroll that’s placed on the left shoulder. No one in my family’s history has ever had such a tattoo that I know of. Marcella and the other older members of our family are unwilling to talk about what it means. That’s as much as I can tell you about the third tattoo.”

*Great, just great.* No wonder Nicco was curious about her tattoo. It looked like she was already claimed as his by the Paranorms’ definition. She wasn’t sure how she felt about serendipity making that type of decision for her. But now she had more information on her side than Nicco suspected she knew. Forewarned was better.

“Thanks, Sophie. I guess I better not be getting any raven tattoos in the near future, then,” Grace said.

Sophie laughed with Grace. They finished hanging all the charms in

short order. Grace felt better knowing she possessed an outward sign Sophie's family was behind her, even in this small way. As they said their goodbyes at the door, Sophie stopped and bent down to pick something up from next to the door.

"I almost forgot," she said, handing Grace a bouquet of mixed flowers in a glass vase. "These were sitting there when I got here."

"Thanks." Grace took the vase and waved goodbye to Sophie. As she set the vase down on the table, she noticed a small envelope. She froze when she read the message.

*I'm sorry your friend Billy is in the hospital. Take care of him.*

*Rest assured, you are all on my mind and I will be watching over all of you closely.*

*Especially you, my dear. I have great plans for you.*

It was signed: *Your new friend.*

## Chapter 38

Grace raced to the kitchen and grabbed the lighter from the drawer next to the sink. She flicked open the top and struck a flame, getting ready to put the card into it, when she stopped herself. It was possible the Glamour wrote the card and brought the flowers himself. It was within the realm of possibilities that he was that arrogant, and destroying the card would eliminate the opportunity to check for finger prints.

Grace closed the lighter and visualized the dark material sliding away from her hand. The chances were slight, but she might be able to read something from the card. She grunted in frustration when all she saw was what appeared to be the back room of a flower shop with a woman in an apron cutting and arranging flowers into vases.

Resigned that her abilities weren't going to help, she grabbed a small plastic zipper bag from the pantry and shoved the card into it. She placed the bag in the refrigerator to help preserve the evidence on it. She planned to reach out to one of Billy's relatives on the force for help. All they'd need to know to follow through on investigating the card with the forensic group at the station would be that Billy's attacker was the reason behind her request.

Grace returned to the living room, grabbed the vase full of flowers, and headed back into the kitchen. She threw the flowers and vase into the trash can and slammed the lid, then changed her mind, opening the can again. Pulling out the flowers, she left the vase in the trash. Grabbing a pair of scissors from the knife block, she savagely cut the stems and petals, throwing the pieces into the sink. After shredding the bouquet, she fed them through the disposal until nothing remained.

*Thanks for the flowers,* she snarled, dropping into one of the chairs at the kitchen table to catch her breath.

She still couldn't believe the Glamour figured out who she was and

where she lived this fast. He must have some powerful resources at his disposal. It confirmed their suspicions he wasn't the only one involved in the case.

Grace stood again and paced around the room. She was right to ask Anthony to stay with Billy and for Danny to keep an eye on DL and Beth. It was tempting to go back to the hospital and protect them herself, but she needed to see Nicco.

The arrangement with Nicco made it impossible for her to call him with her questions. She had to be there in person to do the readings in order to get the answers she needed from him. She had to have faith in Anthony and his family to stop the Glamour if he showed up at the hospital.

The worst thing to do was spend time tormenting herself about Billy's and the others' safety. She needed her full attention on the meeting with Nicco and making plans to capture the Glamour as soon as possible.

The Glamour was hoping to keep her off guard by threatening her friends—trying to get and keep the upper hand in what was becoming a contest of skills and will. But if he didn't realize it already, he would soon learn that this was personal—Grace would never back down. Not until she dealt with him permanently.

Grace thought back to her conversation with Sophie. Sophie mentioned Paranorms might try to get into her house out of curiosity. The Glamour had more reasons than other Paranorms to get into her home. The hair on the back of her neck stood up as she realized the flowers had arrived while she was in the shower.

Returning to the table, she grabbed her Glock from the holster lying there. She didn't notice anything suspicious when she came home from the hospital. She wasn't surprised she'd missed something, given her state of mind and physical exhaustion. No dead bunnies boiling on the stove, but she wasn't paying much attention when she returned home. She had only dropped off her stuff in the kitchen and gone right to the shower.

Grace left the kitchen to begin a circuit of the house, starting with the front rooms and working her way up to the second floor. She checked all the security locks on the windows and doors as she went, making sure there was nothing broken and no signs of forced entry.

She checked each room, with particular focus on her bedroom and Danny's room. But nothing appeared to be moved or taken. Although with the mess in Danny's room, it was anyone's guess if it remained unchanged from when he was last there. She would have to wait for him to get home and check the room for himself.

Grace went back to the first floor, realizing she had not checked the kitchen windows or back door. The locks on the windows and the door were fine, but her skin was still crawling, prompting her to check the back yard. She unbolted and opened the door, leaving the screen door closed for the moment. Two flowers lying on the top of the steps drew her attention—a daisy and a red tulip.

Grace stood there staring at them in a daze. Could this day could get any more surreal? The Glamour had found her home and knew about Billy and her friends at the hospital. But somehow, he also knew about her parents, the graveyard, and the flowers she brought to them. She felt like an insect underneath a microscope, watched by unseen observers. It was time to be paranoid.

Holding the pistol in one hand, Grace cracked open the screen door. She slid past it, making sure it didn't make noise when it closed. She realized a second later that she was silhouetted by the kitchen light standing in the doorway—it was pointless to attempt stealth now.

Her instincts were telling her to scout the back yard. Grace stepped over the flowers as she descended the back steps, avoiding the cracked and roughened concrete on the bottom. She surveyed the ground at the base of the steps in the light from the open door. There were no obvious footprints in the grass, but enough time had passed since the delivery for evidence to

disappear.

She turned from the steps and looked out into the back-yard, letting her vision adjust to the dim light. She walked the fence to make sure nothing was hiding in the shadows. The Glamour, or his accomplice, was long gone. He most likely let himself in by the gate and out again. But she couldn't keep herself from checking around the house to feel some sense of control over her environment again.

As she suspected, Grace found nothing unusual and returned to her kitchen. The flowers, she left to rot where they were. She was finished with mind games and being pushed around by this guy.

She would postpone her meeting with Nicco. She needed time to make a trip to the hospital to check on everyone and tell them the Glamour was a real and immediate threat. She had to talk with Danny about how they would tackle the case without the help of Billy, Anthony, or DL.

## Chapter 39

While Grace was at the hospital looking in on Billy she also wanted to check on DL and Celeste and see how Anthony was holding up. She was surprised to find Sophie sitting outside the room when she got to Billy's floor.

"You must have come straight here after leaving my house," Grace said as Sophie rose to greet her.

"Yes. I couldn't get Anthony to leave his watch. I thought I would spell him for a while to give him time to grab something to eat and get in a quick nap."

"He told you what we're up against, and why he's staying here?" Grace asked, surprised Anthony would talk about what was happening with anyone other than Nicco.

Sophie lowered her voice to a whisper. "I didn't ask for all the details. But he shared enough to let me know it involves a Paranorm, and that's why he's staying—to keep an eye out for your friend.

He gave me a description of the man you've been trying to catch. I'd recognize him if he came to the hospital. There are other Paranorms who work here, and they're on alert too. Anthony should be back soon if you want to wait to talk to him."

"No." Grace was touched her friend would help out in whatever way she was able to, regardless of how little she knew of the situation. "I wanted to see that Anthony got a chance for a break, but it looks like you beat me to it. Thank you."

"Sure, Grace. I'm happy to do it. I'll let Anthony know you stopped by to see him."

Grace considered leaving a warning for Anthony with Sophie, but knowing the Glamour knew they were at the hospital would change nothing.

They were all taking this seriously enough already. There were more people than she thought looking out for Billy.

Grace gave Sophie a hug and opened the door to Billy's room. Billy's mother was sitting by Billy's side, holding his hand in one of hers, using the other hand to stroke his arm. Grace moved to the opposite side of the bed to talk to Mrs. Winiarski face-to-face.

Mrs. Winiarski smiled at Grace over Billy's still form. "Good to see you, Gracie. I'm glad you stopped by. Your friend Anthony has been attentive and helpful, but it's great you're here."

"I'm so sorry for what happened to Billy," she began.

But Mrs. Winiarski interrupted her. "No need to apologize. Billy wouldn't be part of something if he didn't believe in it. He's always believed in you. If you had a case which needed his help, I'm sure he was happy to do whatever he could for you. It's always the risk you take when you're working on the side of justice—something might go wrong, and people might get hurt. You can't let that stop you from trying to do what you know is right."

"I wish it was me instead of Billy in this bed, Mrs. W." Grace's guilt at everything that happened nearly overwhelmed her again.

"Nonsense, child!" Mrs. Winiarski's eyebrows furrowed. "Don't go taking on trouble when it's not yours to take. There's a reason you accepted this case and a reason you're still standing here right now. To finish it. If it was important enough for Billy to get injured trying to help that girl, then it's important enough for you to do your job and finish it."

Grace smiled around her tears at Mrs. Winiarski's gentle reprimand. Raising a houseful of rambunctious boys had given her the skills to manage and motivate them into doing the right thing when it needed doing. Some tough love was what Grace needed at this point.

"You're right. That's what I need to do. Finish it." Grace crossed the room and bent down to hug Mrs. Winiarski while she was still seated, so she



didn't need to let go of Billy's hand. "You'll call me if anything changes?"

"Sure, honey. We'll let you know as soon as anything changes," Mrs. Winiarski assured her, shooing her out the door before turning back to watch over Billy.

Grace left the room, easing the door closed behind her. She waved at Sophie, who was still waiting for Anthony to return, and went to catch the elevator up to Celeste's room. Going to visit DL and another one of his injured kids gave her a sense of déjà vu.

When she reached Celeste's floor, she saw Danny walking up and down the halls. He was watching everyone coming and going on the floor with intense scrutiny.

"*How's everyone up here doing?*" she asked him once she got his attention.

"*Things have been quiet, thank goodness. I can't tell you how glad I am to say that!*"

"*Let me pop in to see DL. After that, I'll talk with you about the new plans for the case.*"

"*Sure thing. I'll wait outside the room until you're done.*"

She knocked twice on the door, then opened it. DL and Jennifer were sitting together talking with Celeste. As Grace entered, Celeste turned and watched her warily, no recognition on her face.

"Hey, Grace." DL smiled up at her. "I'd like to introduce you to Celeste. Celeste, this is my friend, Grace."

"Hi, Celeste," Grace said as she came next to Celeste's bedside.

"The doctors said she's doing well," DL informed Grace. "She's coming home with us tomorrow to join the rest of the crew and spend some time letting her leg heal." His smile at sharing the news appeared bitter-sweet to Grace.

"I'll ask some of Anthony's friends to come help out at your place for a few days." Grace tried to sound innocuous in front of Celeste and

Jennifer.

“Is the extra ‘help’ necessary?” DL asked.

“I’ve heard from our friend recently. He’s looking out for everyone’s health and wellbeing. I just want us to take the necessary steps to keep things quiet for the girls’ recovery.”

DL’s eyes got wide as he digested what Grace had implied. “Okay. I’ll take some time off to spend with Beth and Celeste. We can work on studying for their GEDs while they recuperate, and we’ll be happy for whatever help Anthony’s friends can give.”

Celeste groaned in mock despair at the mention of her GED. But it was obvious she was also pleased she’d be spending time with DL and Jennifer while she recovered.

Grace said her goodbyes and left the room to find Danny. They made their way to the nearby chapel for a bit of privacy for their discussion. There, no one would interrupt Grace thinking she was free to talk because she wasn’t speaking out loud.

Grace walked Danny through everything that happened since she left him watching over everyone.

*“Oh my god, Gracie! Are you okay? That’s horrible! I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help you and make sure he didn’t get inside the house!”*

*“It’s okay. I had a great substitute with my pistol.”* She tried to make light of her fears now that there was some distance from the situation. She didn’t want him to feel guilty for not being there.

*“Celeste is going home tomorrow, and I’ll ask for some Paranorms to guard DL’s place until we’ve taken care of the Glamour. Anthony and his family are taking care of Billy. I think we’ve done the best we can to ensure everyone is safe.”*

*“So, with everyone else out of commission, what are we going to do next?”*

*“I can tell you what I will **not** do, is sit and wait for the Glamour to*

*make his next move. We've been chasing after him, trying to interrupt him while he's playing whatever game he's playing—following his rules and letting him lead us along by our collective noses. We should flip that on its head and bring things to him instead."*

*"What are you planning to do?"*

*"Convince the Glamour to meet me at a place and time I choose. And then I'm going to take care of him."*

*"You want to take him on by yourself? Head on?"* Danny's voice shook with fear.

*"Yes, that's what I'm saying! He's fascinated with me. Of all of us, he chose to send those flowers to me. I say I use that to challenge him to a meeting where I finish things once and for all."*

*"Well, you aren't doing it without me!"* A stubborn look settled on Danny's face.

*"I wouldn't dream of it, kiddo. You'll need to watch my back for me. With the guys being out, I'll need you on this case full time—once Celeste gets to DL's place and a Paranorm is watching them. Everyone will have the best protection we can provide for them. Then you and I can get to work finishing this thing."*

*"You've got a plan to flush out the Glamour and stop him from killing more girls?"*

*"The beginnings of one. Once I have time to get some answers from Nicco, I'll have a full plan ready to put into action."*

## Chapter 40

Grace walked the long hall to meet Samuel, who rose without speaking from a stool to open the door. He gave her a gracious nod as she crossed over the threshold.

Grace was too preoccupied to question the bouncer's change in behavior. She hurried across the room to Nicco's office, wondering if he would be waiting for her.

She entered the room to find Nicco standing at one of his bookshelves, a thick volume held in one hand, while turning the pages with the other. He glanced up when she entered the room, then re-shelved the book before turning to greet her.

"Good evening, *mio caro*. Another visit is always a pleasure." He moved to sit behind his desk.

"Would you like to have a seat?" he asked as she moved to stand opposite him.

"No, thank you. I prefer to stand."

"I take it you want more information on the man you are trying to capture. Shall I get more objects for you to read?"

Grace stared at Nicco. He always greeted her in that polite, neutral way, even as he was doing everything in his power to use and manipulate her. She was done with other people pushing her around and trying to get her to do things their way. Whether it was the Glamour, or The Family, it was time the games stopped. Right here, right now.

"Yes, I've come for information on the Glamour. But no, I will not do more readings for you in exchange. Only the information I want, no bartering."

Nicco stared blankly at her. "You are refusing to honor the conditions of our agreement?" he asked, the threat apparent in his tone.

“Come on, Nicco. You know as well as I do, this whole ‘arrangement’ is complete bullshit. You bullied me into agreeing to read for you in exchange for information. I’m saying I will no longer bow to your strong-arm tactics. We will work in an equal partnership from now on. One which starts with me getting the information I need to deal with the Glamour permanently.”

Nicco’s face went stone still while she spoke, his sapphire eyes turning a cold, hard blue.

“Miss Bishop, I would caution you against making demands of me. You are in no position—”

“Oh, but I think I am.” Grace interrupted him, leaning in to rest her hands on the edge of his desk, looming over him. “I’ve heard about the threats you use to keep the Paranorms in line—you’ll cut them off from their powers if they don’t do what you want. The problem for you is, the threat is empty when it comes to me.”

Nicco gave a mocking laugh, but his posturing didn’t deter her. She had him, and she knew it.

“Don’t pretend I’m like the other Paranorms, Nicco,” she continued. “I’m the first Paranorm with more than one ability. You won’t block me from my powers. You and The Family are too interested to find out how it’s possible. You won’t risk an opportunity to find out by doing something as foolish as blocking my powers.”

Nicco considered her, all false sense of levity quelled at her words.

“And what’s more, I am an *Aperto Rotto* who stayed sane and functional. Rare enough for the any *Aperto Rotto*, but one with two abilities? Inconceivable, I would bet. You’re curious to find out how I did it—how I could master my abilities without help from the Paranorm world.”

Nicco’s expression changed from one of disdain and anger to one of amused respect. “I see. You believe you are holding all the cards because we would not be willing to block your abilities due to your distinction as a multi-

ability *Aperto Rotto*? But you forget, *mio caro*. There are other ways to force you to acquiesce to our bidding. Others who will be affected by your lack of cooperation.” His voice never rose in volume but still held a sharp edge.

“Do you think you’ll get me to cooperate by threatening my friends?”

She leaned closer to him over the desk, balling her hands into fists on the wooden surface to keep from lashing out at him. “Let me tell you right now. You don’t know me at all if you believe bringing my friends into this, or hurting them, will force me to jump to your beck and call. I will walk away from this entire Paranorm bullshit. You’ll never get the answers you want about me and my abilities if you so much as look at one of them the wrong way.”

Nicco didn’t recoil under her angry retort. Instead, he stood and leaned in to meet her face-to-face.

“Now it is *you* who is threatening *me*, Miss Bishop?” he asked, his voice now loud and angry.

Grace was pleased to see she’d broken through his calm façade to reach some real emotion. Now to throw him off guard again.

She sat in the chair Nicco offered to her earlier. “Of course not, Nicco. I’m simply looking to renegotiate the terms of our original agreement,” she said with forced mildness.

Nicco blinked in surprise and then followed her lead to retake his seat. After a moment’s pause, he asked in a warmer tone “And what would be the new terms of the agreement?”

Grace smiled a pleased smile.

“You give me official recognition as a Paranorm. From now on, I’m considered ‘an employee’ of The Family who on occasion gives readings. You will answer my questions, provide the information I request, and I’ll do the readings on my schedule.”

Nicco regarded her, his expression thoughtful. “You want an official

recognition?”

“Yes, it’ll make things easier if everyone knows I have your ‘seal of approval.’ At some point, they’ll learn about my tattoo and wonder why I’m not recognized as one of them.”

Nicco grimaced at the mention of her tattoo but didn’t appear inclined to argue the point. “Agreed, I will recognize you. Now as to the other conditions you stipulated. There are certain things I cannot tell you—things that would not be shared even with other Paranorms. But I will share what I may without requiring a reading first. There will be times when you have to do readings on my schedule, due to circumstances needing immediate attention. Would those ‘terms’ be acceptable?”

Grace had pushed her position about as far as she could. It was reasonable she should be treated like the other Paranorms, at least for now.

“Agreed.” She rose from her seat to offer Nicco her hand, resisting the urge to spit on it before holding it out. Better not push it and offend Nicco’s delicate sensibilities.

He gazed at the proffered hand for a moment before rising himself and grasping it in his own. His grip was warm and firm, and he met her eyes without resentment as he shook her hand.

As they both settled back into their respective chairs, Nicco got to the point. “What information are you seeking, *mio caro*?”

“I want to learn more about the Glamour. I assume Anthony got you up to speed on what happened when we confronted him at the warehouse?”

She paused until Nicco nodded his acknowledgment, although he offered no further condolences for what happened to Billy. “I’m wondering how he was able to create the ‘creature.’ Given Paranorms have only one ability, he shouldn’t be able to manipulate minds *and* build a monster. Either he’s like me with multiple abilities, or he had help from someone else. Which is it? Is it possible for another Paranorm to build a creature like that?”

“Applying the principle of Occam’s Razor, the answer would be, this

involves a second person.” At her look of confusion, Nicco continued. “In essence, it means the simplest solution is the best solution. Until you came, it was unheard of for Paranorms to have multiple abilities, ergo, a second person.”

“Another Paranorm?”

“I have heard of Paranorms with the ability to preserve things, like food, but not one who could preserve human flesh. I am not sure anyone with a ‘preservation’ ability would be mentally imbalanced enough to consider human flesh as the subject of their power. Although it is unheard of in our history, it is possible a Paranorm could create such a creature.”

Not the news Grace wanted to hear, but it confirmed her suspicions and made sense, given all she saw and learned about the Paranorms.

“It means there are two of them we need to stop, not only the Glamour,” Grace said.

“I am afraid that is true, *mio caro*,” Nicco said, with genuine sympathy in his voice. “To stop these murders, you will need to eliminate both Paranorms.”

Grace’s task had doubled, if not increased exponentially, but her resolve was undiminished. She needed to finish this—for DL, for the girls, and for Billy. She had to come up with a plan. And fast.

“Is there anything else you can tell me about the Glamour or the other Paranorm?”

“No, *mio caro*, there is nothing else I can share with you,” Nicco said.

Grace focused on Nicco’s eyes at hearing his particular phrasing, as if he was trying to tell her something without saying it. But she couldn’t tell from his expression whether she was being paranoid or if she was catching on to a subtext to their conversation. Regardless, their agreement was for him to share what he may, and she would need to trust he was keeping his word.

“I’ll take learning about a second Paranorm as enough for what



needs to be done,” she conceded. “What has to happen for you to recognize me as a Paranorm?”

Nicco smiled at her redirection, this one having more warmth than previous one. “You are wondering if I need to make a ‘proclamation’ regarding your new status?” he asked, for once without condescension or mockery.

“Something like that,” she admitted.

“It requires two things. I inform Marcella of your status, and she will pass the word to the rest of her family.”

“That sounds simple enough,” Grace said.

“Marcella will tell the Paranorms. I will make a similar announcement to The Family.”

Grace felt a tinge of apprehension at the mention of The Family. She was already on their radar. It shouldn’t bother her they would be told of her new status. She hated all the attention this would bring, but it was the best thing to do moving forward, for her, Danny, and her friends.

“And the second thing?” Grace asked. “Do I have to go through an initiation rite, a ritual, more readings or something?”

She hoped for once it would be a simple requirement that wouldn’t put her through another emotional ringer.

“Nothing elaborate,” Nicco reassured her. “We will pierce your ears that you may wear the ‘*segno di famiglia*,’ the earrings like Anthony and Sophie wear, as an outward sign of your status as a Paranorm.”

Now that she thought of it, Anthony and Sophie were always wearing modest sapphire earrings—they were smaller versions of the large one in Nicco’s left ear. Anthony had an earring in his left ear, while Sophie wore one in each ear. Sophie hadn’t mentioned the earrings during their conversation about the tattoos.

“You want to pierce both my ears, right here in your office?” she asked half-jokingly.

“I can do it for you right now.” Reaching into a drawer of his desk, he pulled out a blue velvet jewelry box to place it, lid closed, between them on the desk.

*The man is prepared for anything.* Grace looked over the box. She never got her ears pierced because she didn’t see herself as that “girlie.” She didn’t want to bother with earrings each time she went on the job with the force. The latter was no longer relevant, and the former, it appeared, would be adjusted to fit the circumstances.

“Do I need both pierced with the ‘*segno di famiglia*,’ like Sophie? Or can I just do the one?” she asked.

Nicco sat for a while, thinking through her suggestion. “By tradition, the male Paranorms will receive a single *segno di famiglia*, while the female Paranorms will get two *segni di famiglia*.”

Seeing her obvious disappointment, he continued in a playful tone. “Well, *mio caro*. Seeing how you are defying tradition by being both an *Aperto Rotto* and having multiple abilities, I suppose we can break the rules this one time, if that is what you want.”

Grace sighed with relief. One earring she could handle without having to shift her self-image too much.

“Which ear should it go in, then? Left or right?”

Nicco’s smile was mischievous. “It should be the right, don’t you think? Males on the left. Yours on the right.”

Again, Grace felt there was some subtext she was missing. But she decided not to be concerned about why Nicco was pleased with the idea. Better to get it done and get out there to deal with the Glamour and the second Paranorm, starting with the warehouse cleanup and reading the Glamour’s knife.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

Nicco stood and moved to her right side. “Close your eyes, and it will be over quickly. It will only sting the tiniest bit.”

## Chapter 41

Nicco couldn't help the self-satisfied smirk that followed Grace out of the room. And as he expected, a breeze stirred the air as soon as the door closed behind her. Nicco gestured the spells of Second Sight and Hearing and turned his chair to face Gabriella, who was sitting on the edge of his desk.

"I knew it," she said, grinning. "You like the girl."

"It is a real pleasure battling wits with her. Even beyond the challenge of discussing Viora's pet while limited by Viora's spell. The girl has spunk."

"Ah, so you admire her. That is a surprise."

"I learned to admire spunk from the best of them," he said, grinning back at her.

"Cheeky, devil," She slapped his arm in admonishment. "How is it dealing with Viora's spell?"

"I can sense it whenever I am in in the girl's presence. It is like a thin film of oil coating my skin. It stretches like an elastic balloon each time I push the limits of the spell's binding."

"Don't push too hard, or Viora will figure out what you are up to, Niccolo."

"I know how far I can push such a spell. I am monitoring myself to avoid alerting Viora of my attempts to go against her command. The work we did when I was your apprentice is coming into good use these days."

"I was training you to survive what your father might force upon you. I didn't dream at the time it would be something to use against Viora. Even so, there is no need to push things too far. You shouldn't reveal to her that you can deviate from her wishes."

"Viora's position as head of The Family might give her enough power to set the spell, but my power and skill can minimize the overall

effects.”

Gabriella gave him a calculating look. “I would be careful assuming you are that skilled, Little Raven. Clever enough, I am sure. But you have not been practicing your powers for years. You are not as skilled as you were fresh out of your apprenticeship. You cannot be sure the same is true for Viora.”

“Then, it is a good time to get back into practice. There is a new piece on the board, and Viora seems interested in how it is played. That means I should be interested too.” Nicco pulled sharply on the cuffs of his shirt one-by-one, straightening out the sleeves.

“Besides, I am intrigued by Miss Bishop’s resistance. I have not met someone unafraid of me in a long time, Gabriella. None of the Paranorms aligned with me would ever have thought to force me into a re-negotiation of terms. It was bold of her to use her raven tattoo as leverage, even when she was not aware of the full implications of the image.”

Gabriella nodded. “The girl must have gleaned the importance of the raven’s location and posture from one of the Paranorms. But no one alive today in the Paranorm family knows the true significance of the scroll and the words it contains. Those words are themselves a distant memory for even our Family.”

A distant memory that left Nicco disturbed when he tried probing for it.

“Yes, I agree. Miss Bishop is piquing my interest in her and the activities of her friends. Even as an outsider, she is coming to influence both the Paranorms and The Family. I admire her.”

“And maybe also have empathy for her situation?” Gabriella asked softly.

Nicco grew somber at her question. “I am not sure how Miss Bishop’s situation and mine are similar.”

“She is an outsider to the Paranorm family, just like you were in your

own family. You ended up in my care because your father tired of having his wife's bastard around as a constant reminder of her indiscretions. It was your mother's obvious preference for you, almost an obsession in her attention and protectiveness, that added to the resentment against you. Especially for Viora, your mother's youngest and most favorite child before you arrived."

"I know all this, Gabriella. Why are you rehashing the past?"

"Because, Little Raven, the past has lessons to inform the present—lessons you have yet to learn." She gazed on him with sadness filling her eyes. "The girl lost her parents. You lost your mother as well. Your mother's suicide after you began your apprenticeship with me cemented the resentment Viora held for you. She blamed you for many things, including your mother's death. I never blamed you because I understood how fragile Leorna was."

"My presence was the one thing that gave Mother the strength to stand up to her husband's hostility, to stand up to his constant demands for her to reveal the name of her lover and my true father. If I had known as soon as I was free from her husband she would kill herself, I would never have let them send me away."

"She did it to protect you."

"But that left no one to protect her!" Nicco threw himself out of his seat to pace the room.

"The only way I survived her death was to immerse myself into my studies, to learn everything I could about my warlock powers, hoping one day I would get a chance to enact my revenge on the man who drove my mother to kill herself."

"And you became one of the strongest warlocks The Family has ever seen."

"But that didn't stop Viora from killing her father before I got the chance and becoming head of The Family, did it?"

A flood of emotions filled him in response to the memories. To

distract himself, Nicco walked to the bookshelf Grace had been examining earlier. He reached up to the top shelf to remove an unremarkable wooden box. Cradling it in both hands, he moved to sit behind his desk, and place the box in front of him.

“Is that what I think it is?” Gabriella leaned in to peer at the box.

Without answering her, he opened the roughly carved lid and, one-by-one, he removed nine small objects from the box. He turned the objects to position them in a line, their faces toward him and Gabriella.

“Your *oggetti di livelli* just sitting in a plain box on a bookshelf in your office?”

“Yes, just sitting on a bookshelf in my office. In an ordinary box I carved myself all those years ago. Where no one would think to look for them.” His tone was gaining back its lighthearted quality.

“One object to match each of my earrings. One object for each of the levels of power I have attained.”

“Objects I gave to you, as Master to apprentice. Each a female figure from a different culture around the world.”

“You were always one to tweak the nose of tradition, weren’t you?” he teased her.

Nicco picked them up one at a time, holding them up in front of her. “A stone carving of a Paleolithic Earth Mother.” The figure was solid in his hand.

“Earth power,” she responded in a formal voice.

He exchanged the stone carving for the next object in line. Call and response, they continued.

“A pearl carving of Chalchiuhtlicue, Aztec goddess of lakes, rivers, seas, and storms.” The figure was cool and smooth.

“Water power.”

“A volcanic rock carving of Pele, Hawaiian Fire goddess of volcanoes.” The carving’s edges were rough and gritty.

“Fire power. I had to get special permission from the priestesses to get that one,” she whispered.

“An opal of Shinatobe, Japanese goddess of the wind.” The figure was light in his hand.

“Wind power.”

“A sapphire carving of Ushas, Hindu goddess of Dawn.” The figure caused his hand to tingle.

“Ether power. My favorite one.”

“A bone carving of Artio, Celtic bear goddess.” The figure sat cracked and yellowed in his hand.

“Power over animals.”

“A limestone carving of Isis, Egyptian goddess of magic and mother to her people.” The figure warmed his hand.

“Power over people.”

He hesitated before reaching down to pick up the next carving.

“A slate carving of Kalma, the Finnish goddess of death and decay.” The figure’s sharp edges pressed into his palm.

Gabriella’s response was brittle. “Dark magic. That one was the hardest for you to master. It does not suit your temperament.”

“And the last, a diamond carving of Eunomia, Greek goddess of law.” The figure was heavy in his hand.

“White magic. The last and most powerful.”

One-by-one he held up the objects, and returned them to the box. A horde of memories held in such an innocent looking container.

“Years of grueling effort and endless failures,” he mused.

“But also years of success. Not everyone attains all nine *oggetti di livelli* in their lifetime, let alone by the age of twenty.”

“I was motivated at the time.”

He placed his hands along the edges of the box, looking to return it to its place on the bookshelf. His right index finger found the slight dent in

the wood. With a grin of recognition, Nicco applied increased pressure on the dent until he heard a soft click, and a small drawer popped open under his finger. He eased the drawer out to show a velvet-lined space, holding a single object. He lifted the object from its hiding place and turned it over in his hands.

“What is it?” Gabriella asked.

He held up a simple wood carving of a woman. A woman with long, dark hair. A woman with a lithe but strong body and determined features.

“I don’t remember giving you that one. Why was it in the hidden drawer?”

“This is a carving I made during my apprenticeship, created from my own experiences. The experiences I had when learning spells of forecasting and premonition.”

“Niccolo! You know making such things is forbidden. And you kept it all these years?”

“Since when have I ever obeyed the rules, Gabriella?” he asked.

He put the carving back into the small drawer, closing it and taking the box back to the shelf.

“It was a childish whim, Gabriella, another act of defiance on my part. Let us leave it at that.”

Nicco turned and met her gaze, keeping his face neutral, so she wouldn’t catch him in the lie.

The truth was, he had made the carving in his late teens, depicting a woman important to his future. A carving he had forgotten as the decades rolled past. A carving that looking remarkably like Grace.



## Chapter 42

There were several vehicles already parked outside the warehouse when Grace arrived. She was happy to see a group of people gathered by the cars. With luck, it meant the Paranorms followed her instructions and had touched nothing in the warehouse. Danny had reassured her the Glamour's knives would be safe where he hid them, but she wouldn't be comfortable until she had them in her possession.

She parked her car near the others and hurried to join them. Danny got out of the car a block earlier to get to the warehouse on his own. Anthony knew about Sabra and might have told Nicco there were ghosts at the site. They didn't want to take a chance another clairvoyant Paranorm was present and risk Danny being seen when they arrived.

The group ceased their conversations as she walked up to them. All eyes turned to stare at her, most with cold appraisal. There was a general murmuring amongst them as they noticed she was wearing the earring. But they didn't say anything loud enough for her to hear it. The strong wave of negativity she felt from them must have been due to the stigma of being an *Aperto Rotto*, as Nicco warned her.

"Hi, I'm Grace Bishop. Who's in charge?" Grace figured it was best to keep this as business-like as possible.

This was her case and her crime scene. She needed to deal with their top person up front and establish her authority there.

The group all turned to look at a lanky redheaded young man, dressed in a flannel shirt, blue jeans, and hiking boots.

Grace was surprised he was the leader. There were older Paranorms there and others dressed in a more professional manner. But she was learning appearances could be deceiving when it came to Paranorms and their powers.

"Good to meet you, Grace." He took her by surprise when he held

out his hand to her in greeting. “I’m Christophano, and I’m in charge of this lousy group of no accounts. But you can call me Fuoco.”

He gave her a broad smile as he pumped her hand with enthusiasm. It was a wonder the rest of the Paranorms took what he said about them in stride—the main reaction being a few rolled eyes.

“Fuoco?” she asked when she could get her hand back.

“Yep, that’s what everyone in the family calls me. I’m a pyrokinetic. They nicknamed me ‘fire’ for short.”

Grace grinned back at Fuoco’s continued enthusiasm. He, at least, didn’t appear to have a problem with her being there. Or her being an *Aperto Rotto*.

“Hey, that reminds me, welcome to the family!” His demeanor became even more jovial, if possible. “Sophie called me and filled me in before I got on the plane.”

There went having another ally in town. But maybe his enthusiasm for her would rub off on the other Paranorms. Then she realized the way he mentioned Sophie’s family was somewhat odd.

“The family ‘here,’ you said?”

“Oh, I guess they didn’t have time to get you completely up to speed, given everything that’s been happening. Sophie’s family is the one here in the Midwest. My family is the one out West, and I work for a different member of The Family there.”

“There are different Paranorm families in the different parts of the states?” she asked.

“Sure. Different ones in various parts of the US. There are different ones in various parts of the world, too. The Family we all work for in the states is only one of The Families across the globe.”

Grace’s mind reeled a bit at the revelation. She never considered what the Paranorm world would be like beyond her doorstep. She was close to overwhelmed at finding out about the Paranorms in Sophie and Anthony’s

family and about Nicco's Family. Now she was discovering the world of the supernaturals was much larger than she imagined.

"You look shocked," Fuoco said, his voice lowered for only her ears as he reached out to squeeze her arm. "It'll take some getting used to, now we've dropped you like Alice in Wonderland into our world. I'm on Sophie's and Anthony's side, your side, in all this. Don't let the other knuckleheads get you down."

Grace fought back tears at Fuoco's endorsement. It had been a rough couple of weeks for her, getting acclimated to a new world-view. It was a relief that not everyone was against her, or as believing of the stereotypes of the *Aperto Rotto*.

"Thank you, Fuoco, I appreciate it." She gathered herself to address the reason they were all there.

Before she could begin, Fuoco jumped in himself.

"We're all here today to help deal with what happened in this warehouse. Several girls were kidnapped and brought here to be tortured and killed. Our job is to do a thorough investigation of the premises and a cleanup of the mess left by the person who did this. Grace will tell us what went on here in detail, once we get inside. I'll coordinate with Grace. Everyone got that?"

All the Paranorms nodded their understanding. Although with the glares some of them threw Grace's way, it was obvious they didn't all like her being part of the operation.

She was grateful Fuoco did not call the girls "Norms," which would emphasize to the Paranorms they were dealing with people outside their group. They understood the basic scenario, that a Paranorm did this to the girls, but Fuoco focused them on the atrocities of what happened there, rather than the type of people to whom it was done.

Grace turned to speak to the group. "I'll go into the building alone at first. A ghost of one the victims was here the last time we came. I don't want

to scare her by bringing in a group of Paranorms unannounced.” Although she figured Sabra, if she was still around, had figured out there was a whole legion of them outside already. “Are there other clairvoyants here?”

To Grace’s relief, a round of “nos” was the response. Nicco must have decided it was a waste of man power to send another clairvoyant to the site if she would be there. Thank goodness for ‘corporate’ efficiency.

She reached out for her brother. “*Danny, are you inside, yet?*”

“*Yes. Sabra already accosted me. She’s pissed that there’s a pack of Paranorms outside the door. I take it they showed up as requested?*”

“*Yes. I talked with their leader. He’s on our side, thank goodness. I can’t say that for the rest of them.*”

“*One convert at a time, Gracie,*” Danny reminded her. “*They’ll need to come around at some point. We’re not going away. I’m sure if you’re your usual charming and witty self, it won’t take them long to change their attitudes.*”

“*Thanks for the vote of confidence, kiddo. Would you let Sabra know the Paranorms are here at our request? I’ll be coming inside by myself first to tell her about what’s going on today.*”

“*Sure, see you in a sec.*”

Grace turned to give instructions to Fuoco. “Okay, give me five minutes to get the girls’ ghosts updated on what we’re doing here. Then you can come in, and I’ll walk you through what needs to be done.”

When Grace got inside, she found Danny had gathered the ghosts to hear what she had to say about the Paranorms and what they were doing there.

“*Is this all of them?*” She wondered at the small number of girls relative to the number of mounds of concrete on the floor.

“*All who are left and willing to listen to you. Several of them moved on once the creature was destroyed, and a few refused to listen to anything I said. This is everyone we’ll be able to reach.*”

Grace turned her head to take in each of the fifteen ghosts, ranging in ages from around fourteen to eighteen. Some of them looked small and frightened. A handful, including Sabra, were not happy with the visitors waiting outside in the parking lot.

*“Danny and I were part of a team who destroyed the creature the kidnapper was making from your bodies. He got away and is still out there, ready to harm other girls. Outside, are people who want to help me stop this guy from doing this to anyone else. I would like your permission to allow them in to help me. Would it be okay for them to come in and do their work?”*

*“What they gonna do here?”* Sabra was the first to ask.

*“They’re going to do a thorough forensic investigation like the police would. Plus, they’ll be using their abilities to get more information about the man who did this to you. They won’t be interacting with you.*

*“I’m the only one here who can see and talk to ghosts. Please let them do their jobs without interference. Once they finish, they’ll destroy the evidence. No one else will know what happened here.”*

*“Ya mean get rid of all of us, dontcha?”* Sabra pointed to the various figures around the room hidden under the concrete.

*“We need to get rid of anything that could expose what happened here to the world. We need to handle this ourselves. One of our own did this, and we have to take care of him ourselves without putting others in danger. My friend Billy was hurt trying to stop this man. I don’t want anyone else to be in danger.”*

*“So what? Ya jus’ gonna come in here and erase us, like we neva live?”* Sabra asked.

Danny stepped in as things escalated. *“I don’t think Mom and Dad would mind if we buried the girls with them. Do you, Grace?”*

Grace was grateful Danny was this openhearted to understand the girls’ feelings. He had the wisdom to find the ideal solution.

*“No, you’re right. I think they would be pleased with the company.”*

Grace turned back to face the gathered ghosts of the girls. *“My mother and father are buried in the Birchmore cemetery. They’re at a wonderful spot on a small hill with a beautiful tree watching over their graves. We could take you there and have you buried with them.”*

*“There space there for all us?”* Sabra glanced at the multiple graves in the room and the ghosts standing together with her.

*“One person outside can control fire. He can cremate you. We can transport the ashes to the cemetery to join my parents.”*

Sabra motioned for all the girls to gather tight around her. She was arguing vehemently for one side. Pro or con, Grace couldn’t tell for sure as she was trying not to listen in on their conversation. After a few minutes of discussion, they came to a mutual agreement, and they gathered around her and Danny again.

*“Fine. We okay to go be with yo momma an’ daddy,”* Sabra conceded, and the other girls nodded their assent as she spoke.

*“It’s okay for me to let the others in and begin their work?”*

*“Yeah, they okay to start.”* Sabra turned to lead the girls off into another part of the building.

Grace said with relief. *“Thanks for coming up with such a great solution, Danny. I thought for a second we would be at an impasse, here.”*

*“Mom and Dad would be happy to have them, if they knew.”* A touch of sadness colored his voice. But he turned back to business. *“I’ll go hang out with the girls while you work, try to keep them distracted while their bodies are cremated. I’ll also check on the knives while I’m at it.”*

*“Sounds like a solid plan. But no manifesting until we’re sure all the other Paranorms are out of the building. We still need to keep that ability of yours a secret.”*

## Chapter 43

While the rest of the Paranorms were working the floor, Grace ran out to pick up decorative boxes to hold the ashes of all the girls. It took trips to three different discount stores, but she finally found enough boxes with flower patterns for each girl to get a separate box. She wanted to make sure they were all handled with dignity and respect in this last treatment of their physical remains. She thought having their ashes buried in beautiful flowered boxes would please them.

When Grace got back, the other Paranorms were gone. Fuoco was still moving from one mound to the next. He was controlling the fire he wielded to reduce the remains to the smallest amount possible but also ensure none of the ashes mixed between the mounds.

While Fuoco finished the last mounds, Grace worked on putting out the boxes, one beside each of the piles of ashes. *“Danny, can you get the girls to come out and help identify which mound belongs to whom? I want to name each one before we take them to the cemetery.”*

*“Sure, Grace. They’re curious about what you’re doing. Now that the others are gone, I don’t think they’ll be shy about coming out to help.”*

Grace knelt by the side of what was once one of the mounds and waited as the girls followed Danny back onto the main floor.

*“I got each girl a special box for her ashes.”* Grace held up a box to show them. *“I want to put the right name with the ashes to bury them with their names. Does anyone object?”*

All the ghosts shook their heads while coming closer to see the boxes she put out.

*“Is everybody happy with their box?”* Grace searched the girls’ faces to confirm they were all satisfied.

They were all pleased enough with the selections, and Grace started

moving from one box to the next. She noted the name of the girl with a black marker on the lid of each of the boxes. For about half of the remains, there was no ghost to tell them which name to use. Instead, Grace added the name of a flower to the lids, in honor of the unknown girls: Rose, Lily, Iris, Daisy, and so on, for her favorite flowers. Her mother would be pleased having this garden of boxes and girls with her. Grace could imagine her looking over them and keeping them safe next to her on the hill.

She paused from her work when Fuoco finished and came to find her.

“All done, Grace.” He looked tired but pleased at what he had accomplished.

“Thank you for all your help, Fuoco. It will make a huge difference for the girls to be out of the warehouse and somewhere safe. I want to get this done for them while things are a bit quiet, and the ashes are still in one place from your work.”

Fuoco looked down at the growing collection of filled boxes at Grace’s feet.

“I think what you’re doing for them is fantastic. I’m embarrassed to say that it never even crossed my mind to do something like this. I was concerned about removing every trace of evidence that could implicate Paranorms in what happened here.”

Grace looked at him curiously. “If you were that worried, why didn’t you burn down the entire building instead of only what’s inside?”

Fuoco laughed. “We try to keep things to the necessary minimum. Burning down the building would take a tremendous amount of energy, and it would risk someone noticing the fire. That could lead to an emergency response and a whole lot of Norms coming to the location in a hurry. This way we can take care of the evidence without the Norms being the wiser. If anyone ever does stumble onto what we’ve done here, it’ll look like a fire happened in the building, but it never got strong enough to burn it down.”



Grace nodded. “Necessary minimum. Makes sense.”

“Do you need me for anything else?” he asked.

“If you wouldn’t mind, could you stay until I’m finished? The Glamour is still out there, and possibly an accomplice. I wouldn’t want them coming back to the scene of the crime and catching me off guard while I’m finishing up with the girls.”

“Sure, I can stay until you’re through. I’ll make a circuit inside the building while you work. Just be within earshot. Let me know when you’re ready to leave.”

“That would be great. Thanks.”

Grace turned back to her work with the girls’ ashes as Fuoco began his guard duty. It took some time to work her way around the room, labeling the boxes and adding in the ashes. Sabra followed Grace to each of the girls’ places, keeping a sharp watch as she moved their remains into their named boxes. When they reached the mound with Sabra’s body, she finally spoke as Grace began to write her name on the top of the box.

*“It okay to use my real name?”* she asked, the most timid Grace had ever seen her.

*“Oh, Sabra isn’t your real name?”*

*“Sabra’s my streets name. My true name’s Shawtel. S-H-A-W-T-E-L.”* Sabra said in a meek voice, as if she was afraid of how Grace would react.

*“It’s a beautiful name, Shawtel.”* Grace wrote the name in a flowing cursive script.

Sabra peered at the new name on the lid and smiled.

Grace smiled back at her. *“Thank you for sharing your real name to help me put it on the box. I’ll take the boxes to the cemetery as soon as I can and get them buried.”*

Once she finished labeling them, she put the boxes into the trunk of her car. She returned to the warehouse to find Danny and the girls waiting for

her.

*“Are you ready to get the Glamour’s knives, now?”* Danny had been waiting impatiently for her to finish, ready to start working on the next phase of the plan.

*“Yes. It’s time for us to learn more about the Glamour and his accomplice. If they touched one of the knives, we can find out who they are.”*

Danny led her to where he and Sabra had hidden the knives by a back corner of the building. Under their direction, Grace moved aside several stacks of old crates and dug through about four inches of dirt and detritus covering the floor.

*“I told you the knives were safe.”* Danny seemed pleased with himself.

*“I’m glad you did such a great job of hiding them. Thank goodness I was already a mess before having to dig this out again.”* She wiped her hands off onto the legs of her jeans and stared down at the knives at the bottom of the hole.

Danny had the foresight to wrap the weapons in a cloth to keep them as uncontaminated as possible. She cringed in distaste at seeing the material was one of the girls’ blouses from the discarded items at the Glamour’s torture table. She felt a deep sense of relief that the table and all the clothing were now burned to ash.

Grace lifted the covered knives out and sank back onto the ground, working to get comfortable. She looked up to find the girls had gathered in a curious bunch around her and Danny while she was busy excavating the knife.

*“I’m going to find out more about the Glamour by reading the knives he used to hurt you girls. You might not want to be here if it’s going to be too painful for you to watch.”*

At her words, a few of the girls moved away, but a dozen stayed to watch her.

Grace unfolded the cloth until the knives were exposed. She selected one of the knives, and brought her awareness to her hands. The dark material disappeared from her arms, leaving her hands in direct contact with the knife.

Grace sat waiting for the vision to start. She shifted a bit on the hard ground, the eyes of the girls on her, waiting for her to discover something important about the Glamour—something to help Grace and her friends find him and stop him. Her chest tightened. Her somewhat unpredictable power had decided not to show up when she really needed it.

*“I’m not getting anything,”* she said to Danny, biting her lip and staring fixedly at the knife in her hand. *“I think I have a bit of stage fright with the audience. I really need to get something from this.”*

*“Take some deep breaths, Gracie. It’ll come. I know it will. Try another one.”*

Grace tried to ignore the shifting of the girls around her as they exchanged glances with one another. She put down the first knife, and took a few deep calming breaths. Mentally setting her intention to be open to learning what the knives had to tell her, she picked up a second knife.

Grace found herself sitting in a car on a city street late at night. Most of the people on the sidewalk appeared to be prostitutes, with a few men talking with them and a few cars cruising by. The person glanced into the rear-view mirror, and she saw the face and gray eyes of the Glamour looking back to her as he smoothed his hair and inspected his teeth.

He returned to surveying the crowd. Grace felt a wave of possessiveness flood her as his gaze fell upon one of the girls. There was no sense of desire for the girl, only a sense of ownership and a need to get the girl into the car as soon as possible. She sensed no anger or maliciousness directed at the girl, nor the mental imbalance she expected from the attacker, only a sensation of pleasure as the object of his effort came toward him as he willed her closer.

All at once, things shifted, and Grace found herself back in the

warehouse. The man was standing over the girl, who was tied and gagged on a table. He was holding the knife in his hand, turning it back and forth, appearing to relish watching the light reflecting off the surface. She caught a small piece of his reflection in the blade as it turned, but this time he had brown eyes.

Grace felt what she expected from the beginning—a gleeful anticipation of the pain he was about to inflict, the beauty he was about to take for his own. Her skin crawled at the malevolent intent filling the Glamour as he turned his gaze down to the girl. She was alive and writhing in terror on the table, unable to move far due to the bungee cord binding her.

“Robyn has done his job well, once again. You are magnificent and will make a fine addition to my creation. Never fear, my dear, the pain and suffering you will soon experience is all for the greater good. It is now time for the Master to begin his work.”

At the Glamour’s words, the girl thrashed against the ropes, her screams muffled by the gag in her mouth. The Glamour chuckled and leaned in with the knife.

Before he could use it, Grace wrenched herself back into her own body. She quickly visualized the dark material sliding back down her wrists and hands, cutting off her connection to the cold metal. She threw the knife to the ground as she scrambled to her feet and propelled herself a few steps away from it.

*“What happened, Gracie?”*

Grace shuddered and took in a deep breath. *“That was the creepiest reading ever.”*

*“Did you see something helpful?”* Danny probed.

*“Not too much. But we have the answer to who the second Paranorm is, at least.”*

*“Who is it?”*

*“The whole eye color changing thing has puzzled me ever since I*

*read Beth. I thought, at first, she was imagining it. Or under the influence of the Glamour to see something that wasn't there. But I saw the identical thing for myself when we confronted him on the street. Nicco said there must be two people involved to explain the multiple abilities, and that scenario was the only one that made sense. But now that I've read the knife, I realize we are not dealing with two people, but two people in one body."*

*"What do you mean two people in one body?"*

*"I'm talking about multiple personalities—two distinct personalities instead of the usual one personality per body."*

Danny's face crinkled. *"Wow, that's weird! But what about the multiple abilities?"*

Grace looked up toward the ceiling, searching her memory. *"When I was studying psychology in college, we learned about multiple personality disorder. They called it dissociative identity disorder in the text books. Often people with DID are not even aware of the other personalities. The different personalities are able to do remarkably different things. One could be a gourmet chef, and another could be a musician, neither having the talent of the other."* Grace looked down at the knife in her hands.

*"In this instance, Robyn, the Glamour, isn't taking part in hurting the girls, only luring them. The second is the one torturing the girls and making the creature."*

*"What does that mean as far as a plan to stop him, or 'them' rather?"* Danny sounded confused.

*"Our original plan of enticing the Glamour out, and challenging him to meet me one-on-one, is still the best plan. We now have more ammunition to get his attention. We know about his multiple personalities and multiple abilities. That means, rather than two people to hunt down, there's only one body. Maybe we can use these personalities against each other somehow once we get him where we want him. But I've enough information to force him to meet with me, now."*

## Chapter 44

Grace sat at the kitchen table, a blank piece of paper in front of her, tapping the pen in her hand against the wood as she gathered her thoughts. Murmurs of conversations from Danny and the girls floated in the open door from the living room as he worked to keep them comfortable and entertained.

Danny was turning out to be a great host, easing their fears of being in another strange place. Even if it was a home rather than an abandoned warehouse. The tall tales he was spinning were hardly believable. But Grace suspected most of them originated with stories from the Professor Espiritos he was spending time with at the colleges.

Grace was trying to figure out the best way to convince the Glamour to meet with her so she could deal with him once and for all. Since he had dictated the method of communication by leaving a note for her on her doorstep, she would reciprocate and leave a note for him, taking advantage of his original calling cards by putting the note out with the tulip and daisy left on her back porch. They were the worse for wear, but she thought he would get the point and be curious enough to read the note.

But how to get the Glamour to be where she wanted him when she wanted him? Grace was most likely the only one who knew of his multiple personalities. She should include that in the note as she read from the knife that this was something he didn't want others to know.

Nicco told her the Glamours in history always became megalomaniacal. She could use the fact that twice now they encountered the Glamour, and he had run from them—once on the street and once at the warehouse. She would taunt him with his cowardice.

Nodding to herself, she put pen to paper.

*To my New Friend,*

Writing it down brought a shiver of revulsion. But if she was going

to take over this game to her advantage, she may as well go full out.

*I challenge both you and Robyn to meet me at my lake house on Monday evening. See the address below. I will be at the dock at 6pm.*

*If you are not afraid to face me then, leave a red rose on my stairs. If you're too afraid to come, leave a white rose instead.*

She signed it *The Aperto Rotto*.

Grace hoped she found the right buttons to push to get him to show, but not pushed so far that he would try to do anything to her or her friends before then. She folded the note and added a piece of duct tape to the folded edge. She picked up the wilting tulip and daisy from beside her on the table and made her way from the kitchen and through the townhouse to the front door.

Stepping outside, she looked up and down the street. It wasn't like the Glamour would just be standing around, but she checked on the off chance she would see an unfamiliar car. It creped her out that she was relying on the Glamour to be stalking her to get a message to him, but she couldn't come up with another way to communicate with him.

Grace bent down to place the note on the top step, using the duct tape to attach it to the concrete. She placed the two flowers on top of the note and then grabbed a rock from the landscaping along the sidewalk to hold them in place. Standing up, she glanced around one more time, still not finding evidence of her stalker.

She would need to keep checking the steps until Monday night to see if she got her answer, then come up with another plan somehow if this one didn't work.

Grace turned around and went back inside the house, locking the door behind her. She stopped in the living room where Danny was holding court with the girls. There were only nine girls left out of the fifteen who were helping them at the warehouse. They all came with Grace when she brought their ashes home. She had opted to have the ashes with her in the

townhouse until she got the arrangements made for their burial with her parents.

Around half of the girls moved on between the woman monster's death and Grace's care for their remains. But there were still nine girls waiting. Once their ashes were buried, some of them might find peace. But there was one other option that would help all of them find some closure and a resolution.

She took a seat beside Danny on the couch, waiting for a lapse in their current conversation. Once the room got quiet, they all turned to her.

*"I'm making plans to draw the Glamour out. I'm challenging him to meet me."*

Some of the girls looked horrified, some fearful, and some, like Sabra, were stoic, waiting to hear what she had to say.

*"I'm going to force him to meet me Monday night at the lake house my parents owned. It's far enough outside of town that we won't be interrupted. I think I pushed enough of his buttons for him to come by himself."*

"What for? Whatcha gonna do?" Sabra asked in her normal skeptical tone.

*"This man is a threat who won't go away without intervention. We can't use normal channels of justice to deal with him. The Paranormal world won't deal with him either. At least not fast enough to make sure other girls, or my friends, won't be hurt. That leaves it up to me to take care of him."*

"Take care of him how?" Danny demanded.

"The only way to stop him is to kill him." Grace's mind was made up.

Danny jumped to his feet. "You can't be serious. Your solution is to execute him? You're talking about outright murder!"

Grace looked up at her brother as he stood over her, angry and confused. Grace knew him well enough to realize his reaction wasn't because he thought the Glamour didn't deserve justice for his crimes against the girls.



It was because he was afraid of what might happen to her. Even if she wasn't discovered for killing the Glamour, it wasn't something that would leave her untouched emotionally or mentally.

But she was determined. She wouldn't let this man continue to hurt girls. Now he was threatening her friends. Everything Nicco shared about Glambours indicated he wouldn't stop on his own, wouldn't stop simply because he was discovered or threatened.

There was only one way to deal with this type of Paranorm, and that was to put him down like the rabid dog he was. Put him down before more girls got hurt. Especially before he moved on to another city where no one knew what he was up to, and he could continue his serial killing unhindered.

*“Danny, think about everything we know about the Glamour. He's already condemned himself by what he's done to these girls. I understand you don't like me taking on the role of judge and executioner. But it's the only way to stop him, and I'm the one who needs to do it.”*

Danny sank back down beside Grace on the sofa, his expression changing as he worked through several emotions. Finally, he reached to grasp her hand and gave it a quick squeeze. *“You're confident you can deal with him on your own, then?”* He looked into her eyes, meeting her determined gaze with a sad one of his own.

*“Yes, I am. Meeting him at the lake means I have a method to dispose of the body afterward.”*

Danny considered her statement, then nodded his understanding. *“And I'll be there as a backup, right?”* It was more of a statement than a question.

*“Definitely, kiddo.”*

Looking at each girl in turn, she continued. *“In fact, I want all of you to be there.”*

Now all the girls looked startled. But as usual, it was Sabra who spoke up first. *“Whatcha want us there for?”*

*“I want to give you a chance to confront the Glamour before I kill him, the chance you didn’t get when you were alive. I’m not asking for you to stay when I kill him. But it would help you move on if you confronted him for what he did to you.”*

*“The Glamour won’t be responsive to anything the girls say,”* Danny cautioned.

*“That’s not the point,”* Grace corrected him. *“The point is for each of you to stand up to him and tell him what you think about what he did.”*

The girls glanced at each other.

*“How’s we s’posed to confront him? He can’t see us, remember?”* Sabra countered.

*“Danny, can you show them what I mean?”*

Danny looked at her for a moment, seeming unsure. Grace nodded, confirming her resolution to share their secret with the girls.

He stood up, his mischievous smile blooming in anticipation of the girls’ reactions. He walked to a knickknack sized crystal on the nearby bookshelf and placed his hand on it, drawing in the barest amount of energy in order to materialize.

There was a collective gasp from the girls, and Sabra jumped up from her seat and rushed over to get right in his face. *“Ya did this at the warehouse didn’t ya—the night we saved Celeste?”* She reached out toward him. *“Ya real now, boy? Live people can see ya?”*

*“Yes. I’m real enough to talk with people and move things around, too. Even to eat if I want!”* Danny’s normal upbeat personality shined through his ear-to-ear grin.

*“How long it last? How long do we get to say our piece?”*

*“It depends on how much energy you take from the crystal.”* Danny demonstrated his corporeality by holding up the crystal he used to manifest. *“I can teach you how to do it. With this sized crystal, you’ll have about half an hour to be real again.”*

Grace hadn't been sure it would be possible for other ghosts to manifest. But Danny wouldn't offer to teach them if they weren't able to learn how to do it. He wouldn't be that cruel. He would have simply offered to manifest and speak on their behalf.

*"Danny will teach you to manifest yourselves. I'll bring your ashes along when I go to the lake house. Then you can all be there with us. I'll put enough crystals in the car that you can all manifest once we're there. You'll have time to say what you need to the Glamour, and maybe I'll get some of my own questions answered. Then, I will end this."*

"Okay, deal," Sabra answered for the girls. *"We wanna start learnin' how to do this right now."*

Grace wasn't surprised by how fast Sabra took up the offer to learn the trick from Danny. The other girls didn't look so confident. They might not all follow through and go with her to the lake. The best she could do was give them the choice. The rest was up to them.

Grace left Danny taking the girls through how to use the crystals, and went upstairs to do her yoga, meditate, and get ready for work. About two hours later, she came downstairs to find Sabra and several other girls manifested and moving around the room, touching things and picking up objects.

*"We're making great progress,"* Danny reported. *"By the time you get home from work, we'll have everyone doing it!"*

*"Great! I'll leave you to it, then."* Grace grabbed her backpack and keys and headed toward the door.

Grace wanted to check on the flowers and the note as she headed out to work to make sure they were still secure and waiting on the front step. She pulled open the door to have what must have been two dozen loose red roses cascade onto the floor at her feet.

She had her answer from the Glamour.

## Chapter 45

Late the next afternoon, Grace stopped by the hospital to check on Billy and see how his family was holding up. When she arrived at his room, she found Anthony, looking somewhat bedraggled, in what had become his permanent place, sitting outside in the hall. Sophie must have brought him a change of clothes recently as he was at least wearing something different than the last time she visited. She nodded to him as she entered the room, not surprised to find Mrs. Winiarski at Billy's bedside.

"Hi Mrs. W." She greeted her with a hug.

"Gracie, good to see you, honey. The crew left a few minutes ago. They've all gone to grab a bite to eat."

"And you didn't join them?" Grace admonished her.

"No, I don't have much of an appetite these days. Not with Billy still playing Sleeping Beauty." Her half-hearted attempt at a joking reply was tinged with sadness.

"Why don't you at least walk down to the cafeteria to see if they have anything that might interest you? Even if it's a slice of chocolate cake? It would be good for you to stretch your legs for a bit, and getting something in your stomach will help keep up your energy for sitting with Billy. I can stay with him while you're away."

Mrs. Winiarski eyed her. "Okay, I appreciate your offer. Maybe I'll go take a walk down there. See if I can find something to tempt me. Would you like me to send Anthony in to join you?"

"Yes, I would like that," Grace admitted, surprised at herself.

Mrs. Winiarski unfolded herself from the chair, slowly straightening as several joints popped. She put a hand on her lower back and stretched a bit before turning and walking through the door.

A few seconds later, Anthony came into the room.

“Would you shut the door, please?” Grace requested before he got too far into the room.

He raised the door stopper with one foot to let the door swing shut, making sure it closed with only a small thump.

“How are you getting along with Billy’s family?” She took a seat next to the bed and laid her hand on Billy’s arm.

“They are marvelous, especially Mrs. Winiarksi.” He took a seat opposite her, sounding surprised by the experience. “They are generous and welcoming. They let me come in and see Billy all the time. They even bring me food when they stop by to see him. They don’t ask questions about me staying out in the hallway.”

“Not what you expected?”

“No, not at all. Sophie always gives me a hard time about my attitude toward Norms. She tells me I spend too much time on the stage seeing them as an audience rather than as real people. Sophie is around them all day with her job. She always has a more open attitude toward them than me,” he admitted as he followed her lead and took Billy’s other hand.

“And now?” Grace prompted him.

“She is right. Being here with Billy’s family makes me realize how foolish I have been.”

“Well, Billy’s family is fantastic, especially his mom. They’re a second family to me, which makes me biased when it comes to them. Not all Norms are as open and supportive. But it’s good you’ve stepped off the stage to get to know some of the Norms.”

“I am not glad this happened to Billy,” he said, gesturing to Billy’s bandaged head. “But regardless of how this all turns out, I am glad I met him and you, Grace.”

Grace shifted in her seat, turning to look at Billy. “How’s he doing?” she redirected.

“The doctors say the brain swelling has gone down some but not as

much as they would like. According to the doctors, it is not unusual to keep someone in an induced coma for several weeks. They are not overly concerned at this point, only hoping to have more progress by now.”

“There’s a chance he might not come out of this, isn’t there?” Grace asked. “He may never get better? I’m not trying to be negative about his chances, but I also want to be realistic about what might happen from here.”

Anthony grew solemn at Grace’s questions, searching Billy’s still face before answering. “I understand what you mean. I think it is still too early to be sure. But there is a chance Billy could never wake up again.”

It was what Grace needed to know. She couldn’t talk to Mrs. Winiarski or Billy’s brothers about it. They needed to focus all their positive energy into believing he would get well. She needed to face the reality of the situation as it gave her even more reason to stick to her resolve and finish things with the Glamour like she planned.

Grace leaned in close to Billy, wrapping her arms around his still form to hold him in an awkward hug and lay her cheek against his rough unshaven one.

She whispered into his ear. “Keep fighting to come back to us, Billy. Your family needs you, and Anthony needs you. Danny and I need you, too.”

Tears pooled in her eyes, and she blinked rapidly to stay focused. “I’m going to meet the Glamour at Mom and Dad’s lake house tonight. I’ve challenged him to face me there, and I plan on making sure he never leaves again. If you were awake, I’m sure you’d tell me I’m doing something foolish and try to stop me. But I’m not.”

She squeezed him harder. “I have to risk it—for the girls he hurt, for everyone he might hurt in the future, and for you. I’m as prepared as I can be, but I’m not sure whether I’ll be coming back home tonight. If I don’t, I want you to know I love you. You’re the best big brother and friend—better than I deserve. You’ve always inspired me, and it’s your example I’m following tonight. You have to get better, Billy. Please get better.”

She gave his stubbled cheek a solid and lingering kiss, then straightened back up in her seat.

“Grace?” Anthony questioned her once she regained her composure. “What are you planning to do?”

Grace grimaced at him, glad to have something to be annoyed in order at to move on from her tears. “I’m taking care of the Glamour tonight.” She poured her commitment to her plan of action into the tone of her voice.

Anthony scrutinized her face for a moment. “I see. You are planning on doing this alone, I take it?”

“Yes, I am.”

“No way in Hell! It is too risky. I’m going with you. Who else are you going to take with you to have your back? Billy is lying here now because we risked having a Norm help us try to capture the Glamour.”

Grace bristled, but the weight of guilt she felt over what happened to Billy was too heavy to deny.

“And which Paranorms do you trust enough to help you? Don’t you dare mention Sophie’s name. There’s no way I would let my cousin risk herself. She’d have no idea how to fight such a creature. I am the only one—”

“You?” Grace’s stare turned hard. “What training in combat do you have? When have you become an expert in fighting, spending all that time doing shows at the theater?”

Anthony opened his mouth then shut it without saying anything as his face grew red.

“I’m sorry.” Grace rubbed her forehead with the palm of her hand. “That was a real asshole thing to say.”

“But it is true,” Anthony said with sagging shoulders.

“Billy had the training but not the Paranorm powers to protect himself from the Glamour. You have the Paranorm powers but not the training. I have them both. I don’t see me finding anyone else like me to

bring along to the party. And I won't risk someone else getting hurt because I wasn't willing to go it alone."

Anthony answered with a small nod.

"You should stay here with Billy in case the Glamour pulls a fast one and comes here instead of meeting me. I wouldn't put it past him to pretend to be willing to meet me and then use the opportunity to get access to my friends. This is where your Paranorm powers can really be a help to me."

"I could send for someone else to watch Billy—" he began.

But Grace interrupted him. "No, you're the one I trust to keep Billy safe. No offense to the other Paranorms, but if I'm going to risk everything tonight, I can't be worrying about whether someone is doing their job here. I know you will, and it will let me focus on what I need to do."

She knew Anthony didn't like what she was saying, but he couldn't argue with her logic, either.

"If something happens to me tonight—"

"Grace—"

"No, let me finish. If something happens to me tonight, tell Billy how much I love him, and I tried to do the right thing. He'll understand, and in time, he'll forgive me for doing this. Tell him I was my usual unbendable stubborn self, and I wasn't willing to accept your help or put anyone else at risk. I had to do this myself. Will you do that for me?"

Anthony didn't point out that he might never deliver the message to Billy if he stayed in a coma. He bowed his head a moment then looked back into her eyes, accepting her decision. "Yes, Grace, I will."

"And please explain to Sophie for me. I didn't have time to catch up with her before I left tonight."

"She is over at DL's right now, keeping an eye on him and Beth, but I will tell her if anything happens."

At the mention of DL, Grace looked at her watch. She had a few more minutes before she needed to hit the road. She should call him and let



him know what was going on before she did.

Grace stood and circled around the bed to where Anthony was sitting. She surprised him and herself by giving him a quick hug. “Despite everything that’s happened, I’m happy I got a chance to know you, too,” she whispered.

Then she released him to open the door and slip out into the hallway.

As soon as she got to the parking lot and pulled herself back together, she made the call to DL. He picked up on the second ring. Grace’s throat tightened at the sound of his voice.

“Grace, I’m glad you called. I was about to check in with you to see how Billy’s doing.”

“He hasn’t changed much. Some reduced swelling in his brain, but no major progress to report. The doctors say it’ll take some more time.”

“I’m sorry he hasn’t seen much improvement. We’re all sending our prayers to him and his family.”

“I’m sure they appreciate that. All the help they can get, right?”

“Definitely. Speaking of progress, how’s it going with our ‘new friend’?”

Grace walked him through her plans to meet the Glamour, including the chance she was giving the girls to find closure in confronting him.

“I would ask you to swing by and pick me up on your way. But I know you can’t do that—I’d just be a liability for you at this point. I’ll settle for saying thank you for what you’re doing for the girls...and asking you to take care of yourself.”

“Thanks, DL. I want you and Beth safe tonight,” she said relieved, not wanting to start another discussion about the feasibility of her plan. “I hear Sophie is there watching out for all of you?”

DL barked a laugh. “Sophie’s got Jennifer and Beth and bunch of my girls here doing a ‘Tarot Reading party.’ It was a clever way to get them off the streets and away from the Glamour, and they’re having a blast. Could be

an all-night thing. Maybe even a slumber party afterward.”

“Are you joining in the reading?”

“Oh, no. What Sophie is doing is real enough, but I don’t believe in relying on hints of the future to dictate how I live my life. Free will and all. I’ll take it as it comes, one day at a time.”

Grace shook her head at the phone. But she admired DL’s conviction that he didn’t need to know what was coming to live his life the way he wanted.

“Good luck, Grace. Call me when it’s over.”

“Will do,” she assured him, turning the key in the ignition and putting the car into drive.

It was time for her to get back to the house and get everyone on the road.

## Chapter 46

Nicco ended the call from Anthony, already moving toward the hidden door at the back of his office. Grace expected to meet and kill the Glamour tonight, but she wasn't sure she would succeed. Nicco didn't think she had much chance of beating him alone.

Facing the hidden door, he made a few patterns with his hand and concentrated his will, and the door opened. He stepped into the dark room as the door eased shut behind him. With another motion of his hand, lanterns lining the walls flared to life.

He hurried to the middle of a room about double the size of his office and knelt in the center of a pentagram that lay within a circle. He slowed his breath and centered his mind. Gathering his will to a single point of focus, he grabbed the rough stone knife lying at his feet.

A small table in the corner crashed to the ground.

Nicco jumped to his feet, turning to face the sound. He quickly made the signs for Second Hearing, knowing Gabriella would not leave him in peace until she had her say.

"Just what do you think you are doing?" Gabriella's voice rang out in the room. "Niccolo Sidotti, answer me. What are you doing?"

The intensity of her voice pushed Nicco back a step, the force of it a physical pressure against his body. In response, his heart skipped a beat.

With an unsteady hand, he activated the spell for Second Sight, bringing Gabriella into her full glory, her eyes piercing him with their anger.

"I do not have time for your interference, Gabriella." He turned back to the pentagram and resumed his kneeling position.

"I heard you talking to Anthony. You are doing something idiotic to go after that girl, aren't you?"

Nicco sighed and turned to glare at Gabriella over his shoulders.

“Yes, she is in trouble. She has gone to confront the serial killer, and I intend to do whatever I can to help her.”

Gabriella began to speak, but Nicco held up his hand to interrupt her.

“I have little time. I did not have the foresight to track down all the places she might go. Most Norms would run in this situation, given the challenges she is facing. But Grace is not a Norm, and she is not running away from anything tonight.”

“That foolish girl,” Gabriella said, eyes widening.

“I can track her through the *segno di famiglia* I gave her. I am lucky she has not taken it off. I sense she is headed north of the city, but I do not have the luxury of chasing after her in a car. I will need my full concentration to track her. And I cannot afford to involve anyone else or put anyone else at risk.”

“Are you planning to do a summoning?” Gabriella asked. “I do not see that you have made the preparations.”

“There was no time for me to make preparations to ask for help from a benevolent creature. I do not have the luxury of completing the physical and mental cleansing rituals or attuning to a state of openness and harmony with my powers to summon such a creature. Things are moving too fast.”

He stared at the knife in his hands. “And I have mixed emotions about the situation. I want to help Grace, but I have less than benign feelings toward the Glamour. Without fully sympathetic intentions, I won’t be able to succeed in the summoning.”

“So you will take a shortcut.” She gestured to the knife still in his hand. “Resort to Black Magic.”

“Yes, I am going to use Black Magic.”

“You are ready to make a sacrifice to bend the creature to your will?” She turned to survey the room.

“Something like that.”

Her brow furrowed. “You will need quite a lot of blood to call forth a

being that can get you to Grace in time to help and to keep it from escaping into the world and unleashing chaos and destruction.”

“If I was a weak warlock, I would. But with my strength, only a little blood is required to summon it.” He motioned to his arm.

Gabriella gasped, reaching out to grab the arm holding the knife.

“Niccolo, you cannot!”

Nicco looked at her, his face hard as stone. “I am strong enough. It will take only a small offering. While I continue to give it my blood, I can easily control it.”

“But the blood price! If you use a limited amount of blood to harness such a creature, there will be a large blood price to pay before the end of the night. The volume of blood required will be a death sentence if a human must pay it.”

“I know.” He met her eyes without hesitation. “I am counting on finding a deer or other large mammal in the woods before the sun rises.”

“But what if you cannot? Using your own blood in the summoning means you are not just risking your life—the price will be your soul.”

Gabriella fell by his side, her body shivering.

“Yes, Gabriella.” His voice was soft as he put down the knife and held his arm as if wrapping it around her shoulders.

“But I am not willing to take another’s life for this. I alone will bear the risk. I need a creature that can get me to where Grace is as fast as possible. I have to call Glasya-Labolas. He is one of the more powerful and less controllable of the demons, but the one best suited for my needs.”

Gabriella looked up to him with tear-filled eyes. “You will do this for *her*? Risk this?”

“I have to. I have waited this long to find her, Gabriella, since my apprenticeship when I first carved her image. I will not lose my chance, even if it means going against Viora. Even if it means risking my soul. My soul is already lost if I lose her.”

Gabriella searched his face before nodding. She wiped her tears away and rose.

“But your love for the girl won’t help you, Niccolo. Viora’s spell won’t let you summon any demon.”

Nicco stared up at her, mouth agape, realization slowly dawning on him. He had been so focused on finding a way to get to Grace, to help her, he never considered that none his plans would matter.

“No,” he said, his eyes lowering to the knife and the runes drawn on the floor. The rage began to burn in his chest making it hard for him to breathe.

“But her spell cannot stop me,” Gabriella said softly.

Nicco’s eyes jerked from the ground to search her face.

“What do you mean?” he demanded.

“I cannot summon the demon for you. That requires being present on the physical plane.”

At her words, the hope Nicco had felt building began to dissolve.

“However, I can take on the effects of Viora’s spell for you,” she clarified.

“What does that mean? ‘Take on the effects?’” he asked, suspicion thick in his tone.

“I mean that I can draw the effects of Viora’s spell to me temporarily to allow you to complete the summonings. I can’t break her spell permanently, but I can redirect it to allow you to do what you need to do.”

“How is that possible?”

“I have always been one of the most powerful witches in our Family,” she said proudly. “Even if I am not present in the physical realm, my magic is powerful enough to impact another’s magic here.”

“You have never done this before,” he said, staring at her intently. “Why not?”

She remained quiet, waiting for him to come up with the answer

himself.

“Because of the consequences,” he whispered after a moment.

## Chapter 47

“What will happen to you if you do this?” Nicco’s heart filled with dread as he waited for her answer.

She met his eyes without flinching. “I am not quite sure,” she admitted. “But the chances are good that I would be expelled from this plane.”

“But that would be like dying a second time!” Nicco jumped back to his feet.

Gabriella raised her hand to quiet him.

“Niccolo, I have been on this plane for hundreds of years. I knew at some point I would need to transition, to continue my life’s journey beyond this place. I have been patiently waiting for that time to arrive. It appears that this might be the moment.”

Nicco shook his head in denial.

“You have a choice, Niccolo,” she chided him. “You can keep me with you on this plane and sacrifice the girl. Or you can let me finish my time here with you and do what you can to save her. Which will it be?”

Nicco clenched his teeth, struggling to find a way out of making a choice between the woman he had loved his whole life and just found, and the mentor who had been his constant companion and supporter all these years.

There was no choice. He was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for Grace. He had to honor Gabriella’s willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for him.

“I accept your offer.”

Gabriella gave him a gentle smile of approval.

“Then why are you standing here wasting precious time?” she said. “Let me check your runes to make sure you haven’t missed anything.”



Nicco smiled wanly at her. Gabriella—always the teacher. He was confident she wouldn't find any fault in his work as she moved around the pentagram and the enclosing circle.

“This is all well and good, but you have left out several important runes.”

“Where?” Nicco's eyes narrowed as he moved closer to the circle to get a better view of the floor. “Which ones? All the required runes are present.”

“For someone who likes to skirt the rules, you are being too conventional here. You are doing this for the sake of the girl, so you should include runes showing your emotions for her as well. That will make the spell stronger.”

Nicco rubbed the back of his neck and blinked rapidly.

“Come, come, Niccolo. You just said that you are willing to risk your soul for this girl. You should have no hesitation in putting runes for that in the spell.”

Nicco knelt down beside the circle. He pulled a piece of white chalk from his shirt pocket. He quickly drew a shield and spear for the Protector rune and two overlapping hearts for the Heart Connection rune, calling their names as he completed each one.

He looked up at Gabriella, who nodded her encouragement and motioned for him to continue.

Nicco raised his eyebrows at her. After a brief hesitation, he added a heart with a key inscribed at its center. “Heart's Desire,” he said in a firm voice, before placing the chalk back in his pocket.

“Good, very good.” Gabriella looked over the entire set of runes and nodded once. With that, she withdrew to stand in the corner of the room and began to speak the spell to take on the effects of Viora's compulsion.

Once she finished, he picked up the knife, and in one quick motion, he ran the edge of the blade over the meat of his forearm in a long but

shallow gash, allowing the blood to flow but avoiding major arteries.

He heard Gabriella gasp and turned to see her clutching her chest in pain. When she noticed his hesitation she glared at him to continue.

He hardened himself, then drew the symbols of Opening and Holding around the knife wound, activating them with his will. The wound would not close until he was at his destination.

Nicco let the blood run down his arm and drew out the symbol of Calling onto the floor with the drops. He moved with deliberate care despite his anxiety to get to Grace, knowing a mistake here could mean his death. He accompanied the movement of his bloodied hand with a chant. The blood, his will, the symbol, and the chant would be the powerful combination necessary to call forth the creature and place it under his power. He fought back the surge of vertigo that came with working such a powerful spell, concentrating harder on his chanting.

Finishing with the spell, he slipped back from the symbol he had drawn. He carefully crossed outside the circle and the pentagram to the unmarked stone floor.

He turned to look for Gabriella in the corner, but she was gone.

Clamping down on his rising sorrow at her loss, he returned his focus to the markings at his feet. He held his breath until a dark line appeared in the air above the symbol of Calling. Then, an enormous clawed hand and the tip of a gigantic wing emerged from the darkness.

## Chapter 48

As Grace drove up to the lake house, the motion sensor on the light pole in the driveway activated, adding its glow to the early evening sunlight. She saw no other vehicles in the area. But that didn't mean the Glamour hadn't parked at another location near the lake and walked in from there. He could already be here waiting for her, and based on his personality, she would lay odds he was down at the dock already.

*"I want you all to stay here in the car until I've checked things out. I'll tell you once it's okay to manifest and come down to the dock,"* Grace instructed them.

They agreed. No one wanted to use the crystals too early and miss the chance to confront the Glamour.

*"Sure thing, Gracie. We'll be waiting here until you give us the okay,"* Danny assured her.

Grace got out of the car, searching the surrounding woods for signs of the Glamour. She adjusted the holster inside her jeans on her right side, making sure the Glock was loose and ready to draw. She was carrying it in a concealed fashion as she didn't want to provoke the Glamour before she got her questions answered.

Grace had replaced the barrel of the pistol with a backup before coming to the lake house. When she first started as a rookie cop, one of Billy's uncles had recommended she pick up a few extra barrels at a gun show. He had told her it was a precaution, but not one ever discussed in public. It had made Grace uneasy to follow his advice, but now she was happy she had. It would make it impossible to connect her gun to whatever happened tonight. And she wouldn't have to get rid of her pistol, only the barrel.

Grace eased forward while searching the surrounding area, making

her way down the railroad ties that made a walking path to the boat dock. The sun would set in an hour, and the lake was already taking on a colorful, warm glow. With night approaching, the woods were darkening, and the dock was partly in shadow.

As she reached the edge of the ramp leading to the covered boat house, a second motion sensor activated. A sulfurous yellow light bathed the ramp and the house, casting her shadow off to the side and onto the lake. Grace was expecting the light to kick on as she approached. But she was still a bit surprised when a figure stepped out of the boat house shadows and into the light.

It was the Glamour. He had been standing there, unmoving, long enough for the motion sensitive light to turn off. He hadn't ambushed her when she walked out to the boat house, hadn't stepped in behind her to cut off her retreat. His initial lack of aggression was something she should look to manipulate.

"Miss Bishop. I'm finally getting to meet the infamous *Aperto Rotto* that has everyone talking."

"I'm not the only Paranorm that has everyone talking." Grace strained to see his eyes, to find out which personality she was dealing with right then.

The light from the lamp was casting shadows across his face, and she couldn't make out his eye color. She either needed to be closer to him or wait until he moved and the shadows shifted. She decided waiting was the better choice.

"Ah, yes," he said, taking her comment as a compliment. "I gained quite a bit of notoriety these past few weeks with all the attention you and your friends have been giving me."

*Notoriety was one way to put it..., if you were a whacked out sicko.* But not the point Grace was making.

"Who are you?" Grace asked him, impatience winning out over

prudence.

“Who am I?” He looked pleased at the question. “Isn’t that the question we’re all searching to answer, Miss Bishop? ‘Who am I?’ Do you know who *you* are?”

Grace wasn’t surprised she didn’t get a direct response from the man. She was starting to guess which personality she was talking with already. She was hoping to get some answers to who this man was, and the Glamour wanted to play another game with her instead. She decided to go along to find out where this would take them.

“I’m starting to find out who I am, what I’m capable of myself,” Grace admitted.

“Such a shock, I’m sure. Becoming an *Aperto Rotto*. Finding out the world is not as you thought it was, eh?”

“You could say that. But what I was asking is which *one* are you, which personality?”

“Clever girl.” Venom leaked into his voice as the jovial tone drained away. “Too, too clever,” he repeated almost to himself.

A cold finger ran down Grace’s spine at his response. Here was the not-too-stable personality she had expected to be talking with tonight.

“And how did you figure it out, hmm? No one ever discovered me. Robyn—sweet, gentle, accommodating Robyn—is the one they all see. The one they all interact with daily. They never know I’m behind the scenes directing him, misleading and manipulating them. Even Robyn thinks I’m a real person outside of him, not a separate personality. To him, I’m ‘Gustav’ and as physically separate from him as you are.”

Grace decided not to offer a response to the rhetorical question. Hoping Gustav would continue to talk about himself, which he did.

“But you, little *Aperto Rotto*. You come along and figure out I exist, with minimal help from the other Paranorms.”

Gustav paced back and forth within the few feet available on the

ramp, his brown eyes finally becoming visible under the light.

All at once, he stopped his pacing, turning to smile at her. “Of course. I knew the whispers that you’re a psychometrist were true! And when I left the warehouse in such a hurry, I abandoned my tools. You read one of my knives, didn’t you?”

Grace’s stomach rolled at Gustav’s description of the knives he used to torture the girls as his “tools.”

“Yes. I read a knife to learn about you and Robyn. But you still haven’t answered my question. If you’re not Robyn, who are you?”

Gustav paused and looked at her with head cocked, listening to something she didn’t hear, the smile never leaving his face. “I am Robyn’s protector—the one who’s kept him functional and sane all this time.”

He was the sane one? What an upside down world Gustav had created for himself.

He gave her a shrewd look, his smile melting into a scowl.

“You aren’t convinced, Miss Bishop? But I’m sure you were willing to accept everything Nicco and The Family told you. What the other Paranorms told you about someone with Glamour abilities.” His eyes became more intense.

“Haven’t you asked yourself how Robyn has the Glamour abilities but stayed sane when all his predecessors did not? You assigned me all the traits associated with a Glamour Paranorm. But shouldn’t those be traits Robyn shows rather than me? My ability is Preservation, not Glamour?”

He was right. Robyn appeared benign in the reading. But shouldn’t the personality with the Glamour ability be the one acting like this self-proclaimed Preserver personality was? It was like the two abilities and the consequences flipped between the personalities. Her stomach twisted thinking about how she had been defining them, how she thought she understood them.

“I see from your expression I created a quandary for you. Yes, a

delightful quandary, is it not? But shall I let you in on a secret?" He moved a few steps up the ramp toward her, as if to create a more intimate conversation.

Grace fought the instinct to back away as he moved closer. She stood her ground as if his movement didn't faze her. It was best not to respond. Instead, she waited for Gustav to continue his story.

"Robyn was becoming like all the other Glamours, unstable and fixated on using his power. Influencing the minds of others requires Glamours to create new realities for whoever they're trying to manipulate. They have to see and embrace things that are not part of reality in order for their victims to do so as well. Using this power is a rush for the Glamour, but this twisting of reality bends their minds. They lose touch with reality themselves." His hands tightened into fists at his side.

"And dear Robyn's collapse was happening faster because of what The Family was doing to him. They pushed him too far—manipulating him, torturing him, destroying his family. You see, they wanted more Paranoms just like him, wanted to create an army of Glamours."

Grace's eyes widened as a chill ran down her spine at the vision of an army of these unstable Paranorms.

"Your abilities manifested because of your trauma, your car accident, yes?"

Grace nodded, not liking where the conversation was heading but wanting to encourage Gustav to continue.

"The Family was convinced that Robyn's powers were a combination of being a member of a family that could control animals and because he stopped breathing during childbirth—was dead for a short time. His own trauma—much like your own."

Grace blinked rapidly, shaking her head in denial that she might be connected to him and Robyn in any way.

Gustav chuckled.

“So, The Family bred Robyn’s family to one another. They tried smothering and resuscitating the children when they were born. You can imagine that most of them died or were brain damaged by the process. When his family could not produce another Glamour, they were killed off, and The Family moved to breeding Robyn and repeating the procedure with *his* children. Robyn cracked. But when he did, I was created.” Gustav thumped his chest with one fist.

“I was the one who ‘became.’ I was the one who took on all the ‘consequences’ of being a Glamour, I am what his mind did to preserve his sanity and his life. Wasn’t it fitting in becoming *his* preserver, I became a Preserver in ability as well?”

Grace was horrified at what had happened to Robyn, but she couldn’t let that soften her resolve about dealing with the Gustav. Her reading was right. She was back on solid ground with understanding the personalities.

“How is it Robyn is the only one anyone knows about? How can they not know about you?” she asked.

Gustav laughed, more amused than the question warranted. With the laughter, his scowl disappeared, and a smile of victory spread across his face.

“How can someone of my undeniable charisma, strength of personality, and talents stay unknown all this time? Isn’t the answer obvious, Miss Bishop? It’s because I wanted it that way. In splitting himself in two, Robyn somehow maintained his sanity and mine. Robyn lives in the Paranorm world, happy to do as The Family bids him. But I am there always—seeing through his eyes, hearing through his ears. He never knows I am there with him, that I’m the one guiding him.”

“Guiding him how?” Grace was quick to interject before Gustav changed directions.

“I have been guiding Robyn since I ‘became.’ I’m planning on making sure The Family pays for what they did to us. Pays for what they did to our family. It took years of work, years of moving the pieces one-by-one



with no one being the wiser. Not even Robyn.”

“If you wanted to hide all these years, then why the kidnappings? Why the tortures and murders? Didn’t it put you at risk of discovery and ruining all your years of planning?”

Gustav stood unmoving in response to her question, and her heart stalled. She needed him to keep talking. Especially if he would reveal what he was planning. She had done the right thing in asking.

Gustav came back to the present, his brown eyes wide and glowing. “Yes, I’m sure it seems counterintuitive to you. The purpose. It was easy enough for me to influence Robyn into believing he was simply keeping his abilities honed by enticing the girls to come to him. They were like children’s toys to him, delightful things for him to glamour and then send along their way. He never got to see what happened to them afterward. Never realized I was the one picking out the toys, and they were my playthings, not his.”

Gustav spread his arms wide. “Don’t you see the beauty of it? Robyn was manipulated and tortured because of his power. And with my power, I can create a creature, that when released on the world, will be undeniable proof that The Family and their Paranorms exist. Revealed at the right place and the right time, The Family’s demise would have been guaranteed.”

Grace made her decision. “*Danny, get the girls manifested. It’s time to bring them into the conversation. It’ll help shake him up if they come confront him now.*”

“*We’ll all be manifest in a few minutes. Keep him talking,*” Danny replied.

“Playthings?” she challenged Gustav, disgusted. “Is that how you saw the girls? All the torturing was about ‘playing’?”

“It was about challenging my abilities, giving myself license for artistic expression. I was creating something of my own from my own powers.”

“The girls meant nothing to you at all? They were only a means to an end?”

Gustav brushed aside her question with an indifferent hand.

“These Norms mean nothing to us. Are worth nothing to us beyond what we want of them. You are a Paranorm, Miss Bishop. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“No, I do *not* agree!”

Hearing the sounds of footsteps on the trail behind her Grace added, “And the girls you ‘played with’ don’t agree with you either.”

## Chapter 49

Gustav stood frozen in place, his face registering shock as the girls walked up from behind Grace to surround her on the dock. Her plan to take Gustav by surprise and unsettle him was working. Now maybe they would have time to confront him.

Everyone stood and stared at each other before Gustav spoke. “No, it’s not possible. I killed you all myself. How can you be here?”

“We here ‘cause we come for a bit of reckonin’.” Sabra stepped toward Gustav, putting herself at the front the group.

He continued to shake his head in disbelief. Then he closed his eyes, and his whole body started to spasm.

“What happnin’? Why he shakin’ like that? He havin’ one of them seizures or somthin’?” Sabra glanced over her shoulder at Grace.

“I have no idea,” Grace assured her.

All at once, his eyes flew open again. They had shifted back to a gray color. He looked around, scared.

“Where am I?” he asked in a hesitant voice. “Who are you?”

“I already done tole ya. We here for a reckonin’!” Sabra answered.

Grace stepped forward and placed a cautionary hand on Sabra’s arm. “Let me talk to him, Sabra. This is the other one.”

Sabra appeared to consider defying Grace but held her tongue.

Grace crooned like she would to a startled animal. “Robyn, I’m Grace. You’re here at my parents’ boat house. Don’t you remember coming here?”

Robyn’s face tightened, his brows furrowed. “No, I don’t remember that. The last thing I remember was standing in the bathroom. How did I get here? And who are all these girls? They seem familiar.”

Sabra jumped to interrupt. “Sure we familiar ya motha fucka. We the

ones that ya done mentalized and kidnapped. The ones ya tortured and killed. Don't try to lie othawize!"

"No, no!" Robyn shut his eyes as his body shuddered. "I never did anything like that. I would never do anything like that!"

"Whatcha mean lyin' to us about whatcha did to all us," Sabra said as the other girls voiced their anger.

"No, no." Robyn pleaded with her, holding his hands up to defend himself. "I never did anything to you, none of you. It was Gustav, it was always Gustav."

One-by-one the girls chimed in, shouting at Robyn, demanding he stop lying to them and take responsibility for hurting them.

Robyn sank to his knees, raising his arms to cover his head and making moaning sounds as he did so.

The girls stopped shouting, confusion plain on their faces, as their tormentor all-at-once transformed into this cringing, nonthreatening creature.

Sabra turned to Grace. "Why he actin' like this? I thought he'd put up a fight or somethin'. But he just sittin' there cryin' like a baby."

Grace regarded the huddled figure with pity. "This is the person who 'mentalized' you but not the person who tortured you," she explained. "The other personality has used Robyn to help him do all the hurtful things."

"Ya sayin' we ain't gonna get to confront the man who did this to us?"

"I'm not sure, yet. Give me a second to find out." Grace motioned for the girls to stay behind her as she inched toward Robyn, where he was cowering on the ramp.

"*Gracie, be careful!*" Danny called out to her. "*It all might be a trick!*"

"*I'm going close enough to see his eyes. Then I can find out if it's really Robyn, or Gustav playing possum.*"

"Robyn, would you look at me, please?" She knelt down in front of

him but maintained a distance between them to keep herself out of easy arms reach.

Robyn raised his head out from beneath his arms.

“You don’t recognize these girls beyond seeing them on the street?”

“No, I don’t,” Robyn whispered, almost too quiet to hear. His distress was plain on his face and in his voice, growing louder as he continued. “It’s Gustav who’s done these horrible things. I used to think he was a real person, that he was helping me. But I finally figured out he isn’t. He’s some demented part of me that I can’t control.”

Grace’s heart went out to the child-like man sitting there. She couldn’t imagine being put through what Robyn had to drive him to a point his mind creating another personality to save himself then having to learn someone else was in control.

She wasn’t sure how much longer Robyn would be with them before Gustav returned. She needed to get answers from him and fast. “Robyn, can you stop Gustav? Can you keep him from torturing and killing more girls?”

“No, he’s too strong.” Robyn voice shook. “And he isn’t going to stop. He’s going to keep making me help him do those awful things!”

It broke her heart to say it, but she wouldn’t lie to him. “No, you’re right. He won’t stop doing awful things. I’m sorry, but I don’t know how to make him go away and leave you in peace without hurting you, too.”

Robyn nodded, the tears flowing down his face. “I’m losing myself. I can feel it. I won’t be around much longer—Gustav will make me go away.”

“I’m so sorry, Robyn.”

“But you can, right? You and the others came here to stop him, didn’t you?”

“Yes. That’s why we’re here. But to stop Gustav, I have to kill him.”

Robyn gazed up at her face. The trust and relief she saw there struck Grace to the core.

“Good,” he said with a sigh. “If it means you can stop him, do

whatever you have to do.”

Tears flowed down Grace’s cheeks. “Are you sure? Are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes, please help me stop him. I don’t want him hurting anyone anymore, and I can’t stop him myself.” Robyn reached out a hand to Grace. “Please.”

Grace forced herself to her feet, reaching to pull her pistol from the holster at her side. When she committed herself to killing the Glamour, Danny had called it an execution. His words had not affected her because she’d pictured taking out the man who had tortured the girls. But Robyn was like a child. When she pulled the trigger, she would be executing *him*.

As Grace pulled the pistol from the holster, Robyn’s eyes changed from gray to brown. With a roar, he leapt to his feet, charged her, and knocked her backward onto the wooden surface, slamming her head against the ramp. The force of the impact kicked the pistol out of her hands to bounce a few feet away.

The last thing Grace heard before she lost consciousness was Danny screaming her name.

## Chapter 50

Nicco climbed down off the black-as-night demon that had carried him to the lake house. His arm still stung where the open wound bled while they traveled. Flying wasn't an enjoyable experience when he felt like his life was draining away one drop at a time.

The demon raked its long claws across the glade's floor, tearing up large chunks of the earth and tossing them behind it. It fought to break the bonds of Nicco's control, trying to take advantage of the loss of physical contact now that Nicco had dismounted. It snarled in anger, staring daggers at Nicco.

"You remember our agreement?" it's snarling voice echoed in the glade. "The blood price must be paid before dawn or I will have your soul."

"Yes, the debt will be paid as agreed." Nicco stepped back several paces to make room for the creature to leap into the sky once more. It flapped its enormous leather wings, gained height, then glided around the lake and surrounding forests.

Light headed, Nicco placed his hand against a nearby tree to keep his balance. It had taken an act of will to not show how tired he was in front of the demon. Taking a deep breath, he cast a small spell to speed up the healing of his wound—not a full healing as he had to conserve energy for any spell casting he needed to get through the night.

He closed his eyes to replay the view of the area he had seen when flying to the lake house. Finding his bearings, he dashed to the edge of the woods where he could see what was happening on the dock.

He got there in time to see a group of girls and a boy congregated at one end of the ramp to the boat house. Grace and a man were at the other end. She was kneeling in front of him where he was crouched, appearing to be having a nonthreatening conversation with him.

*Dammit!* Nicco's fist clenched in rage. He knew that worthless Paranorm was involved in this mess somehow. But for Robyn to actually *be* the Glamour had implications beyond his threat to Grace. Implications he would have to deal with later.

Nicco tried to move from the woods toward Grace when his muscles froze, preventing him from getting closer. He cursed to himself in frustration as the spell Viora placed on him forced him to stop. Gabriella had taken on the consequences of the spell to allow him to conjure the demon. But nothing was going to help him to get past the power of the spell now.

He was here, a few yards away from Grace and the Glamour, yet helpless to do anything but be a spectator at their final confrontation. But he *was* able to cast a spell to allow him to hear what was happening in the distance. Viora's spell didn't limit him from doing that.

Right after he cast the spell, the scene at the boat dock exploded. The Glamour attacked Grace and knocked her off her feet with enough force to stun her. Nicco strained against the bonds of his containment, the veins in his neck bulging in his efforts to fight his restraints. But he could not break them and instead found himself drained of energy and collapsing against a tree for support.

The Glamour pulled a large knife from a sheath at his side. He moved a step toward Grace's prone form and then struggled in place as if battling an invisible force that kept him from approaching Grace closer.

That pause was enough for Grace to rouse herself and scramble to retrieve her dropped gun. She got off three quick shots into the Glamour's chest. The force of the bullets spun him sideways, causing him to stumble for a few steps before collapsing onto the dock.



## Chapter 51

“Is he dead?” Danny asked, hovering near Grace where she stood panting, her gun still held ready to shoot.

“I’m not sure. I nailed him with all three shots in the chest. That should be enough to take anyone down, even a Paranorm.”

Sabra moved toward the motionless body, but Grace blocked her path with an arm.

“Let me check,” Grace said. “You and everyone else, stay put.”

Sabra grimaced but stayed where she was.

“Just be careful, Gracie,” Danny said.

Grace advanced down the ramp at a measured pace, focused on the body. Although his limbs didn’t move, she could see Gustav breathing, shallow and irregular. A strangled gurgling sound came from him.

She approached slowly, keeping the gun trained on him as she circled to the front of his torso. Gustav’s face contorted with pain, and blood trickled from his mouth and nose. A quickly growing pool of blood surrounded his chest, seeping into the cracks between the boards of the ramp and down into the dark waters below.

Grace assessed his injuries—a punctured lung for sure, based on the strangled breathing. And a good possibility she had hit a large-sized artery by the amount of blood leaving the body.

“Is he dead?” Danny asked.

“Not yet. But it won’t be long,” Grace said, her body tense and sweat rolling down her face.

As his breathing became more labored, his eyes opened. They were back to gray.

Grace hesitated, the muscles on her forearms going rigid as her grip tightened on the gun. “Robyn?”

With a fit of coughing, blood poured from Robyn's mouth, and spasms wracked his body. When the coughing stopped, he cracked his eyes again to stare at her as tears flowed from the corners of his eyes.

"What's going on, Gracie?" Danny asked.

"He's switched back to Robyn. He's not Gustav anymore."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing's changed, Danny. Gustav has to die. That means Robyn, too."

"But, you can't just let him lay there and suffer. You wouldn't let a dog suffer like that!"

With a hard swallow, Grace nodded her head. "Give me your jacket, Danny," she instructed.

"My jacket?"

"Yes. I need it to keep from getting blood on me when I do this."

Danny grimaced, but did as she asked, removing his jacket and handing it to her.

Grace knew from past experience that Danny's clothes became corporeal with him and stayed that way until he went back to his ghost form. She was betting that whatever got on the clothes would be taken out of the physical world with him when he left it.

Grace walked up to Robyn and squatted to look him in the eyes. "I'm sorry, Robyn. I'll make this as quick as I can."

Robyn gave a half smile, half grimace, then closed his eyes a final time as she leaned in to place Danny's jacket over his head. She placed the gun against his temple and put three quick shots into his head.

## Chapter 52

Nicco jerked back at the sound of the gunshots. Grace stood up from the body, letting the gun drop to her side as she wiped her face on her forearm. She turned and walked back to where the boy and the girls stood together in a loose group.

Now that the Glamour was dead, Viora's spell would dissipate quickly. Nicco tried to take a step out of the trees, but with an exclamation of surprise, he ran up against an invisible barrier. A chill crawled down Nicco's spine. He couldn't reach Grace.

She sat down on the edge of the ramp, her legs dangling over the water. She placed the gun down beside her and raised her hands to cover her face, her sobs echoing through the night. The boy shifted from where he stood to go kneel beside her, wrapping his arms around her.

"It's all right, Gracie. It's over. You did what you needed to do. It's over."

This had to be her brother, her dead brother, somehow present and alive. Nicco shook his head, confused at what he saw. He couldn't reconcile his knowledge of Grace's life with what was happening in front of him.

The girls came forward to stand on her other side, some faces creased with concern, some smiling.

Nicco turned his attention from the group surrounding Grace back to the body of the Glamour—which was no longer lying motionless on the ramp.

Nicco watched in horror as the Glamour stirred, then shifted to his hands and knees, the jacket falling away from his face and to the ground. Despite the wounds in the torso and head, the body was working its way to a standing position.

Nicco tried to call out, desperate to warn Grace and the others who

were huddled around her. He shouted as loud as he could but the sound barely escaped his lips.

A noise must have alerted the boy that something was wrong. He turned his head to stare wide mouthed at the approaching Glamour, right before Viora's pet backhanded him across the face. The force of the blow threw the boy away from Grace to land hard on the ramp a few feet away.

"No!" Grace yelled as she turned to reach out to the boy, her pistol sliding off the ramp and into the water.

Nicco's stomach dropped as the Glamour wrapped his hands around Grace's neck.

The apparent leader of the girls yelled "No, not her!" as she leaped to attack the Glamour.

The other girls were quick to follow her lead, surrounding the Glamour and tearing him away from Grace. He dropped her limp form to the ground as he fought the onslaught of attacking bodies.

Their angry shouts carried to where Nicco stood. The Glamour fought them, kicking and writhing, desperation clear on his face as he tried to free himself from their grasping hands. They seemed to possess inhuman strength as they dragged him into the boat house. Soon his screams echoed over the water, accompanied by the gruesome sounds of tearing flesh and popping bones. The listening spell Nicco had cast made the sounds all too easy to hear.

Nicco held his breath, waiting to see if Grace would move. If she was still alive. He sagged against the tree with relief when she stirred.

The ghastly noises from the boat house ceased after a time, and the girls emerged soon afterward, disheveled and covered in blood and gore.

Nicco's attention was drawn by movement on the ramp, and he turned to watch the boy crawl to Grace's side. As she returned to consciousness, he reached out and helped ease her to a seated position.

"Did you kill him?" he asked the girls. "Is he finally dead?"

“Yeah, we done took care that motha fucka,” the girl who led the attack confirmed.

“She gonna be okay?” The girl’s accent was street tough, but her voice carried genuine concern for Grace.

“I got off lucky,” Grace responded in a groggy voice. “No permanent damage, although I’ll have a sore throat and one hell of a headache for a while.”

“We need to get you to the hospital, Gracie. You might have a concussion,” her brother said.

She ignored him and instead focused on the lead girl. “What did you do, Sabra? What did you and the other girls do to him?”

“We took care of ‘em. Just like ya said needed done. We couldn’t let him hurt ya. Not like he hurt us. Not after all ya done for us.” Her statements were full of pride. “We tore him to pieces. He ain’t gonna hurt nobody no more.”

Grace studied the girls for a moment, seeming to take in their appearance with distaste. But the practical woman Nicco knew then showed up, and she simply said, “Thank you. Thank you for taking care of the Glamour.”

As Grace spoke, the girls started to lose their solidness. Each one dissolved from sight. *Ghosts? The girls were ghosts.* Somehow, for a time, the girls were real. But now they were ghosts again. Grace must have been using her ability to continue speaking with them after they dematerialized.

It frustrated Nicco that he couldn’t hear the rest of the conversation. Instead, the sensation of the loosening of the bonds of Viora’s spell distracted him. He tested them as the pressure faded.

Flashes of light caught Nicco’s attention, pulsing in the positions where he last saw the girls. One light for each place a girl had been standing. The lights almost blinded him with their brightness. Then, as a group, they streaked up into the night, moving to join the light of the stars in the sky.

Finally, the bonds lost their hold completely. He burst out of the woods, racing across the grass separating him from Grace. He stumbled over rocks and debris as he rushed to reach her as quickly as possible. He stopped only when he saw the flash of a gun and felt the bullet slam into his chest.

## Chapter 53

A man staggered into the light and collapsed on his side in front of her. Grace lowered her backup weapon that she'd pulled from the holster on her ankle, still clutching it in her right hand. Her mind reeled as she struggled to process the face she had glimpsed.

“Oh my god, Gracie! What did you do?” Danny yelled at her.

“I shot Nicco,” she said as if in a dream, trying to leverage herself up from the ramp one-handed, still unwilling to release the weapon. “Help me get up, Danny.”

He rushed over to Grace and grabbed her hand, yanking her to her feet but jumped to her side as she wavered in place.

She took an unsteady step in Nicco's direction. “Help me over to him,” she pleaded.

Danny drew her arm around his shoulders, holding her hand in one of his and wrapping his other arm around her waist. As fast as he was able, he helped her shuffle over to where Nicco lay on the grass. Together, they knelt beside him. Grace carefully turned Nicco onto his back.

She didn't see blood anywhere. Although she would swear she hit him right in the chest—a bull's eye at close range. She set the revolver down and reached out to his neck to check for a pulse. She let out a small cry of relief to find a steady beat under her fingers.

“He's still alive.” Her voice shook with emotion. “I didn't kill him. Not yet.”

Grace ripped open Nicco's shirt, popping buttons as she did so. She scanned his chest, still seeing no signs of an entry point for the bullet. There was no way she missed him. She was an expert shot, and he had been too close to miss.

What she did find was a tattoo of a raven, whose body and head

covered Nicco's torso and whose wings spread onto his arms and shoulders. "Raven tattoos, again," Grace muttered to herself as she rolled him on his opposite side to face away from her and lifted the back of his shirt.

No exit wounds—only a tattoo of the back of the raven, completing the tattoo from the front. She eased his body to the ground with his face toward her.

"This guy is almost as tattooed as DL, but it's one giant tattoo. Like the one Zack gave you," Danny said fascinated by the art.

Leave it to Danny to be distracted by artwork and forget they were supposed to be saving Nicco's life. At least that's what she thought they were doing. But she wasn't too sure.

Nicco moaned and gave a few painful sounding coughs.

"Nicco, are you shot? Does it hurt anywhere?" Grace asked.

"Does the fact that you are asking me mean you are done flopping me around like a rag doll?" was his raspy reply, said with eyes still closed.

Grace sat down next to him with a sigh of relief. If Nicco was being his usual obnoxious self, he must be okay.

"I was convinced I shot you." She laughed with a hint of hysteria.

"You did." Nicco finally cracked open one eye.

Grace immediately stopped laughing. "That's not possible! There were no bullet wounds on your body. I checked."

"I said you shot me, *mio caro*. I didn't say you wounded me," Nicco corrected her.

He wasn't making any sense. "How could I shoot you and not wound you?" she asked.

"*Mio caro*, there is no way you can wound me. I have been using that protection spell for several hundred years. Injuries might knock me out for a time, but they won't kill me," Nicco stated with pride in his voice.

Then both of his eyes flew open wide at what he revealed.

"Wait a minute." Grace leaned over him to peer into his eyes, finding



a sheepish expression on his face. “Did you say what I think you said?”

Nicco remained silent.

“He said he cast a spell,” Danny said from her side. “It means he’s a Warlock or Wizard!”

“Are you telling me you’re a Wizard? A several-hundred-year-old Wizard?” Grace’s voice increased in volume to match her increasing anger.

“We prefer the terms Warlock or Witch, actually,” Nicco answered in a conciliatory voice after a long pause.

“‘We ‘prefer’? As in, ‘The Family’ prefers?” Grace said in a biting tone.

“Umm, yes.” Nicco attempted to smile up at her, though it was ruined by an immediate wince.

Grace felt no sympathy for the pain Nicco was experiencing at that moment. She didn’t want to be sympathetic right now—she was too busy being completely pissed off.

All this time. All the song and dance. All the ‘consider The Family as a corporation’ bullshit. The whole time she was too busy to ask what type of individuals would be powerful enough to make even the Paranorms align with them—pledge their allegiance like surfs to feudal lords.

Paranorms as powerful as Fuoco working for The Family would only make sense if The Family had abilities beyond those of the Paranorms they controlled. Witches, goddamn Witches, or Warlocks, or whatever the hell they called themselves.

“*Mio caro*, I realize you are a bit upset—.”

“Upset? You think I’m ‘upset’? You have no idea how pissed I am at you and the whole damn barrel of Warlocks!”

“Do you mind if I sit up to discuss this face-to-face?” Nicco asked from the ground.

The night had been too long, and Grace had been through too many mental games to continue one now. She moved back from looming over him

and gave him space to sit up, which he did, cradling his chest with one hand and propping himself with the other.

“Will you bruise at all? Or will the protective spell prevent that too?” Danny asked.

“Danny!” Grace growled at him turning to give him a scowl. “This isn’t the time to for a question and answer session about spell casting.”

“Come on, Gracie. You’re just pissed off you didn’t figure out Nicco was a Warlock before now.”

“What I’m pissed about is the fact that The Family has all this power. And they did nothing to help us or to stop the Glamour. They should have done something when I first went to them. If they had, then Billy would never have gotten hurt. Celeste would never have gotten hurt. Hell, they should have stopped him before any of the girls were taken!” She finished with an accusing glare at Nicco.

Danny sobered as she listed all the people who would be safe and unharmed if The Family had intervened. “I’m sorry. I never thought about that.”

Grace faced him once more, and reached out to give his hand a gentle squeeze. “Neither did I until right now, kiddo. I was too busy trying to get one step ahead of the Glamour and his games, and I wasn’t asking the right questions.”

Grace swung her irate gaze back to the real culprit. “Well, Nicco. What do you have to say for yourself? What do you have to say about this whole mess you had the power to prevent?”

Nicco sat looking at her and Danny, seeming to struggle for words. For the first time since meeting him, she found him speechless, and it infuriated her.

“Wait, don’t tell me. This falls under the ‘there are some things Paranorms are not privy to’ category?” Her tone was ice cold, and her hands clutched into fists.

She fought to contain the urge to see if his protective spell would work against being pummeled.

He dared to look her in the eye. “Grace...”

It was the first time he had called her by her first name, and it made her pause her tirade, as she supposed he intended.

“This is not something you want to hear. But I was commanded not to interfere with the Glamour, especially with your efforts to fight him.”

Grace scoffed at the idea Nicco’s hands were tied the whole time.

“When I told you I was middle management, I meant it. Even in a family of Witches, there are those who lead, and there are those who do the following, like me.”

Grace refused to comment, only glared at Nicco.

“I was as much a pawn as you in The Family’s games,” Nicco said, anger entering into his tone. “Not only was I commanded not to interfere, I was be-spelled to prevent me from doing so.”

“You expect me to believe you didn’t help because your Family wouldn’t let you?”

“It is hard for you to understand, Grace. But the head of my Family ensured I could not help you. You are not the only one who has not been asking the right questions these past few weeks.”

He sighed and shook his head. “I should have listened to Gabriella’s advice when she had you give it to me. I have been a complacent fool, and this disaster is the result.”

“Then I suggest you stop being a fool and start telling me what’s really been going on all this time,” Grace returned to a cold calm.

“It is a long story, spanning many decades.”

“Which means you aren’t going to tell me anything, because you might reveal something you shouldn’t about The Family?” Grace sat back on the ground, grinding her teeth in frustration. “Personally, I think you owe me after nearly getting Danny and me killed by withholding information.”

“Now, I—”

Their argument was interrupted by a loud cry, sounding like a mix of a scream of a dying animal and a bellow of a bull. A large black form flew over their heads, and the air swirled across the surrounding ground at the sweep of its wings.

Nicco froze, his face turning pale as his eyes widened to clearly show the whites around dilated pupils.

“The blood price is paid, Raven King. Your debt is filled.”

Nicco went limp against the ground, closing his eyes as a giddy smile played across his face.

Another pass of the large, dark shape, and then it disappeared from their view.

“What the hell was that?” Grace scanned the sky for the return of the creature.

“My ride home,” Nicco said, his face flushing.

She turned to him and leaned in to stare him in the eyes. “And what fucking ‘blood price’ was that thing talking about?”

“A long story for another time, Miss Bishop.” Nicco sat up again, holding his side tightly. “Suffice it to say that my arrival here tonight was through supernatural assistance which required payment for service rendered. Luckily, it seems the death of Robyn took care of the bill.”

Grace waited for something more from Nicco and sighed forcefully when he didn’t continue.

“Does that mean you’re getting a ride back with us?” Danny asked.

Grace stared at Nicco. She had a choice to make. She could take him at his word—trust he wanted to help and couldn’t. Or she could not trust him and believe he didn’t step in when he had a chance to stop the Glamour.

Which one was the truth? She wished her abilities included the power to detect if someone was lying.

But she didn’t need to make the decision now—didn’t need to work

through all the possibilities and consequences when she was at the end of a long and stressful day—a long and stressful few weeks. And maybe suffering from a mild concussion, she thought as the pain in her head continued to grow.

“Okay, Nicco. Consider yourself on parole, for now. Until I get a chance to decide about you. You and The Family,” Grace said.

Nicco appeared disappointed but resigned and didn’t try to argue with her.

“For now, all I want is to get home, get a shower, and get some sleep.”

“I agree.” Nicco motioned to the remains of his shirt and his dirty clothing with a slight smile.

“You shouldn’t drive in your condition, Gracie. How about letting me drive?” Danny offered.

“The last thing we need is for you to dematerialize in the middle of the drive home,” she said, shaking her head.

She turned to Nicco. “Know how to drive a stick?”

## Chapter 54

Grace stood on the small hill next to her parents' graves. The wind stirred the leaves of the maple, and the air had a crisp fall feel to it this early in the morning. She looked around the small cemetery and noticed how empty it was. Danny and the grounds keeper were the only ones there with her, which meant there wouldn't be people to wonder about her burying a couple dozen small boxes.

If her request to dig the large number of small holes surprised the grounds-keeper, he didn't show it. He only asked matter-of-factly where and how deep she needed them. He did a tidy job of organizing the holes into several concentric circles surrounding the graves at the top of the hill.

Grace felt compelled to give an explanation for the boxes, given the large number of them. But she was reluctant to tell him the real, gruesome reason. She feared the site would become a point of interest for thrill seekers and those whose tastes ran to the macabre. She kept it simple and told him there had been an accident.

Anthony and Sophie had surprised her with a check from their family to buy small grave markers for each of the girls. There were markers with initials where they knew the girls' names and ones with carved flowers matching the names she gave them when she didn't have their true names.

She wasn't sure of the cost of such a gesture. But Anthony and Sophie said the price was of no consequence to their family. They insisted on covering the expense on behalf of the Paranorms, for what happened to the girls.

Grace turned to where Danny was sitting in the shadow of the tree branches, his arms wrapped around his knees. He wanted to be here for the girls today, even if he couldn't be a part of the ceremony. They had agreed he would move out into the cemetery proper once anyone else showed up, to

maintain the appearance he was simply another ghost.

Danny gave Grace a bitter sweet smile as she knelt down on the soft blanket the grounds keeper had given her to keep her dress pants clean. She shared the smile with him and began to settle the boxes in the holes, one-by-one. As she worked, she tried to picture her mother and father there with her and Danny. Positive thoughts of them welcoming the girls rather than thoughts of how the girls came to be there.

Grace turned at the sound of footsteps to see Sophie and Anthony walking together up the gravel path to the grave site. Grace glanced over her shoulder and was relieved to see Danny was gone from his spot under the tree. Not that either Sophie or Anthony could see him without his manifesting, but Grace didn't want him to be conspicuous today.

Sophie waved to her as Grace stood up to dust the dirt from her hands.

"Good morning, Grace." Sophie gathered her into a warm hug. She released Grace with a squeeze. Anthony grabbed her for his own hug. Grace was starting to get over the fact that Anthony was a hugger. Starting.

"What are you guys doing here this early?" Grace asked. "The funeral isn't for another hour and a half."

"We thought we would come and help you bury the girls," Anthony said.

Sophie gave her a gentle smile. "We didn't want you to do this all by yourself, today."

"Thanks. It'd be great to have your help." She was doing well with the process until now. But she wasn't sure how long she could keep her spirits up.

"Are you burying them in a specific order?" Anthony asked. "Or should we spread out and work from there?"

"No. I was just going from one to the next. But now that there are three of us, I think we can each tackle a separate circle on the hill."

“Okay, sounds like an excellent plan. I will go get more tools and blankets.” Anthony turned to head toward the ground-keeper’s shed.

“Is Danny here?” Sophie asked as soon as Anthony was out of earshot.

“Yes, he was with me until you and Anthony arrived. I made him promise to stay out of sight today, to keep people from connecting him with me.”

“I’m glad he’s here. The girls meant a lot to him and I was afraid he would have to miss it.”

Grace and Sophie stood together in comfortable silence until Anthony returned with the extra tools and blankets. Grace walked them through how she was burying the boxes and putting the grave markers on top of each.

“I’m not sure what religion, if any, the girls followed. I’m not very religious myself, but I thought the girls would be okay if we chanted a Buddhist meditation for them as we bury them: Om, Shanti, Shanti, Shanti. Shanti means peace. It’s my most sincere wish for the girls, after all they’ve gone through, to find peace.”

“That’s lovely, Grace. I think it’s perfect,” Sophie said.

Together, they progressed from one grave to the next, placing the boxes and positioning the markers. They worked without talking, each following Grace’s example to repeat the simple meditation for each of the girls.

Grace checked her watch after she finished with the last girl’s grave in her circle. There were about twenty minutes left before the funeral was to start. It gave her plenty of time to put away the blankets and tools and get cleaned up before the others arrived. Besides Sophie and Anthony, she had invited DL, Jennifer, Zack, Celeste, and Beth to the funeral. Grace didn’t mention it to anyone else, thinking to keep the ceremony intimate.

When she left the public bathrooms, the cemetery was filling with



visitors. She walked back toward her parents' graves to meet Sophie. With an unsettled feeling, she realized all the cars at the cemetery were for people heading toward the fresh graves on the hill.

"Who are all these people?" she whispered.

"Well, some of them are my family." Sophie pointed to a large group of people on the left side of the hill. They were all clothed in black suits and dark dresses.

Anthony stood next to a small, much older, dark-haired woman. They were at the center of a semi-circle of people and were deep in conversation. Grace looked over the faces and recognized a few from the theater and the warehouse cleanup. When her eyes found Fuoco, he waved at her and flashed a broad smile. Grace gave a few quick waves in response, feeling a bit overwhelmed.

"Your whole family came to the funeral?" Grace asked.

"Powers, no!" Sophie laughed. "This is just a few of them."

A few of them? There were about twenty people standing around Anthony and the woman.

"Who's the woman Anthony's talking with?" Grace asked, careful not to point at them.

"Marcella," Sophie said. "She wants to speak with you after the funeral."

"Oh." Grace's heart skipped a beat. She would finally meet the head of Sophie's family. She hoped that was a positive thing.

"Isn't that Mrs. Winiarski over there?" Sophie interrupted Grace's train of thought.

Grace looked to where she was pointing and saw Mrs. Winiarski standing on the opposite side of the hill from Marcella and her family. She was wearing a long black dress and an elegant black hat and gloves. Surrounding her were Billy's brothers, uncles, and cousins, the ones not on duty wearing their dress blue uniforms.

Grace walked over to the Winiarksi clan to give Billy's mother a hug and to shake several hands.

"Mrs. W., what are you all doing here?" Grace asked.

"I think it would be obvious, Grace. We're here to attend the funeral."

"But how did you find out when and where it would be?"

"I told her," Anthony said as he stepped up beside Grace.

Mrs. Winiarksi reached out to grasp Anthony's hand in hers. "Yes, Anthony let us know. We wanted to be here, since Billy can't be here himself." Mrs. Winiarksi's voice quavered, and Anthony stepped next to her, sliding her hand into the crook of his arm.

Sophie arrived at that moment from speaking with Marcella and her family. She stepped around Grace to slide her arm around Mrs. Winiarksi's waist opposite Anthony.

Grace followed Sophie's gaze to see Marcella staring at them from across the way, her features stern but otherwise unreadable.

Grace leaned over to ask Sophie what was going on. "Hey, wh—"

Sophie interrupted her with an upbeat voice. "Isn't it time to get things started?"

Grace shot her friend a look, promising she wasn't done with the conversation. Then she moved to the top of the hill, maneuvering between the fresh graves. She turned to take in all the faces below her. Paranorms on one side, Norms on the other.

As she scanned their faces, appreciating the irony of the two groups being together this morning, a third group closed in behind them. Danny and the ghosts from the cemetery. Danny grinned and waved to her, as did Samantha and Joshua. There were less than two dozen ghosts in this small cemetery, but they had gathered to pay their respects along with the living.

As she cleared her throat to speak, a fourth group joined the crowd on the hill. DL had arrived, and with him were Jennifer, Zack, and the girls.

There was also a crowd of street kids in mismatched clothing, slipping into the gap the Winiarksi clan and the Paranorms made for them.

The kids shifted, smoothing down skirts and pulling shirts straight, all the while trying not to get caught eying the policemen next to them with suspicion. DL looked over the kids with pride and a watchful eye and then met her gaze. Grace smiled and nodded back to him.

*There goes the small, private ceremony.* She sighed and couldn't help thinking of Billy still in his coma despite everything they had accomplished as she began speaking.

## Chapter 55

The day after the funeral, Grace received a text message from Nicco. She hadn't given him her number. Anthony must have given it to him to make it easy for Nicco to request more readings from her. The message was cryptic—a few gracious lines asking for her presence at his office the next day.

Grace went back and forth about whether to respond immediately or make him wait. She decided not to force him to change the time to prove she wasn't still at his beck and call. The truth was, outside of work and sitting by Billy's bedside in her off hours, she was available. She figured it wouldn't hurt to be accommodating and meet him when he asked.

When she arrived at the theater, she wasn't surprised to find Samuel sitting at his usual place outside the door to the Paranorms area. What surprised her was that he didn't open the door for her right away. Instead, he held out one of his large, meaty hands to her.

After a moment, she realized he wasn't asking for her to turn over her valuables but was offering to shake her hand. Chagrined, she held out her right hand. He immediately smothered it in his paws, using both hands to shake her arm up and down. It was a bit scary but also endearing.

He mouthed the words "Thank you" and then stepped back to open the door and motion her inside. Word must have spread about what happened between her and the Glamour.

She moaned. She had moved from the pariah of being an *Aperto Rotto* to the notoriety of being the one to stop the Glamour from exposing the Paranorms to the Norms in the most dreadful way.

With those enjoyable thoughts circling in her mind, she made a quick check of the room before entering, noting with relief there were no other Paranorms inside. She didn't want to run a gauntlet of people eager to greet

her. She wanted to get in, do what Nicco needed, and get back to Billy.

This time, when she entered Nicco's office, it had a different feel to it. Somehow less dark and musty—fresher and brighter...even perfumy? And were those flowers on his desk?

Yes, stargazer lilies. That would explain the perfume-like scent. Her eyes narrowed at the bouquet. They were her favorite flowers. God she hoped this didn't mean another round of mind games with Nicco. She was not in the mood today!

Grace started at a movement behind the desk. She chided herself at her racing heart when she realized it was Nicco taking a seat. She swore he wasn't there when she entered the room. She needed to get some rest soon if she was that unaware of her environment. But rest would need to wait until Billy was better.

Nicco smiled at her and then motioned for her to take her usual seat in front of the desk. While she moved to do that, Nicco placed a small, blue glass bottle on the desk in front of him.

“Good morning, *mio caro*. Thank you for coming today.”

Back on the old footing, it appeared. Grace didn't know whether to be glad or disappointed.

She had thought a great deal about what happened at the lake that night. Particularly what happened with Nicco. She'd wondered if their shared experience, and her accidental attempt to kill him, would somehow change how he treated her going forward. She realized now she should have expected the formal, polite, and in-control Nicco—the one she had known before that night—might be who she saw again the next time they met.

She allowed herself the momentary disappointment but didn't dwell on it. The place of the Paranorms was as an employee to The Family, not as friends. Nicco had told her that himself.

“Good morning, Nicco. Always a pleasure,” she replied, keeping her tone light and polite.

Nicco's grin widened, likely in appreciation of the fact that she could pull that statement off without a hint of the sarcasm it deserved.

"How may I help you today?" Grace asked, anxious to finish with her tasks here and get back to Billy.

"It is not what you can do for me, *mio caro*, but what I can do for you," he said.

Grace had come mentally prepared to deal with the mental and emotional challenges of another set of readings. Instead, she had to reorient herself to Nicco's statement.

"What you can do for me?" she asked, waiting for the catch.

"Yes, *mio caro*. Anthony and Sophie have been most eloquent in their praises of your devotion to your friend Billy. Anthony in particular." Nicco paused for a moment, letting the declaration hang in the air.

Grace wasn't sure where Nicco was trying to take the conversation. In fact, it annoyed her that he was poking his nose into her non-Paranorm business. Her stubborn side flared at the thought, and she flattened her lips into a hard line, waiting for him to continue.

Nicco's grin slipped at Grace's continued silence. He must have been expecting a different reaction from her—a reaction from her, period.

Grace felt a guilty pleasure at not acting the way Nicco hoped she would. She needed to stop being such a thorn in the man's side. But right now, she couldn't help herself. It was the only entertaining thing about the whole situation.

Nicco cleared his throat and reached out to push a bottle across the desk toward her.

"Given everything you did to keep The Family and the Paranorms safe from exposure, I felt it proper to thank you in a manner befitting the magnitude of your efforts and success."

Grace lifted her eyebrows at Nicco. This was about what she had done to the Glamour after all. Nothing about saving untold numbers of

innocent Norms from torture and death. It was about protecting the secrets of their hidden world. She shouldn't be surprised, but she had hoped for more from Nicco.

“What is it?” She worked to keep her tone from showing her anger.

“It is a potion for your friend. A healing potion.”

Grace leaned forward to pick up the bottle. It wasn't much. A simple glass bottle, dark blue, with a cork sealing the top. She couldn't tell the color of the liquid inside, but it moved in a thick, viscous way when she swirled the bottle.

“A potion?” She turned her gaze back to Nicco.

“Yes, it will help heal your friend, if you follow these instructions precisely.”

Grace took the proffered note, scanning the instructions he had written for her. They were clear on how to use the potion, with particular emphasis on not letting the liquid inside come into contact with plastics. There was also a name on the note—the name of a Paranorm nurse she could rely on to provide a glass syringe and administer the proper dosage to Billy.

“One dose now while Billy is still in the coma. Another once the doctors bring him out. The most benefit will come from the second dose. But he needs to be out of the coma first for the potion to take full effect.”

“What's the catch? What do I have to do in exchange for this?”

Nicco's face shifted to his usual somber mask at her question. “As I stated earlier, *Mio caro*, it is a gift of appreciation. There is no ‘catch’ for what I am offering.”

*Great, she'd insulted him.* Grace sighed in frustration at her ability to bulldoze right through a sincere offer. It must have taken a considerable commitment of time and energy, if not only plain old expense, for him to make the potion.

She didn't see an easy way to back out of her initial response or to make an appropriate apology. Although “Sorry for being an ass” did come to

mind, it wasn't the right thing to say.

“Thank you Nicco,” she said. “Thank you very much for putting this together for Billy. I can't tell you how much this means to me.”

Nicco studied her face for a moment, appearing to weigh her sincerity. “You are most welcome, *mio caro*. Now be off to the hospital to put it to work.” He waved his hand toward the door.



## Chapter 56

Grace and Anthony stood next to each other at the side of Billy's hospital bed, and Grace tried to not fidget. Other than the nurse and Danny, they were the only ones in the room.

Grace persuaded Billy's family they should go home and get a break from their vigil at the hospital. Mrs. Winiarksi was particularly hard to convince. She was afraid he would take a turn for the worse if she wasn't keeping a mother's eye on him.

But Grace persuaded her that she needed some time in private with Billy after her close call with the case. Mrs. Winiarksi finally agreed after getting a promise from Grace to contact her if there was the slightest change.

They watched as the nurse drew a portion of the bright gold liquid from the blue bottle into a glass syringe. He injected the liquid into a vein in Billy's arm, the one not already hooked up to an intravenous line. He wiped and covered the needle and put the syringe into his pocket. He then stoppered the bottle and handed it back to Grace. His job done, without a word, he left them to wait for the potion to start working.

"Is this going to make a difference? Will it help Billy get better?" Grace was feeling skeptical of the whole hocus-pocus aspect of the situation, not yet acclimated to the idea that Nicco and his family were Witches.

"Yes. If anything can help, it is the '*elisir di lunga vita*,' the 'elixir of life.' I saw it used once before when a Paranorm was at risk of losing his lower leg after a motorcycle accident. It regenerated the leg in about a week. I know Billy's injuries are in his brain, but it should work for him, too."

*"I'm starting to like Nicco more. But I'll reserve my final judgment for when Billy wakes up."* Danny seemed to be trying to keep his usual humor despite his own obvious concerns over the potential effectiveness of the potion.

*“You and me both, kiddo.”*

“How long will it take?” she asked Anthony.

He shook his head, watching the monitors connected to Billy.

“I am not sure. We are not trying to get him healed all the way.

We’re trying to reduce the brain swelling and get him stable enough for the doctors to take him out of the coma. It should not take as long as a complete healing.”

“I guess we’ll just have to be patient.” Grace pulled a chair up next to the bed.

Anthony continued to stand for another few minutes before taking a seat of his own on the other side of the bed. Once he sat down, he grasped Billy’s hand and smiled at Grace as she took the other.

They both sat in silence for a time, watching the gentle rise and fall of Billy’s chest, each lost in their own thoughts.

Grace looked up at Anthony, catching his eye. “Thank you,” she said, her voice rough with emotion. “For everything you’ve done for me and for Billy. I don’t think I would have beaten the Glamour if you weren’t here to help.”

“And thank you, Grace.” He seemed overcome by emotion. “For this.” He raised the hand clasped in his a few inches above the covers. “Or at least the potential for this.”

*“Not to interrupt the love fest or anything, but I think we know how long this magic potion will take.”* Danny beamed from ear to ear. *“Billy’s foot moved!”*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my cover designers B&J Book Cover Designs for the  
awesome book cover.

Much appreciation to my editors: Leslie Watts, Alyssa Archer, and Erynn  
Newman. I wouldn't have such a strong and interesting story without you.

And a thousand thanks to my patrons John and Fran Ippensen a  
and Lisa Peichel.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Denise Bossarte lives in Texas with her husband and their colossal too-smart cat. Outside of her IT day job she is busy following her passions as a photographer, writer, and poet.

Explore more of Grace's world at:

[www.gracebishopnovels.com](http://www.gracebishopnovels.com)

[www.facebook.com/gracebishopnovels](https://www.facebook.com/gracebishopnovels)