

Sheriff Jakob Wulfrik, Jake to friends, family, and those he hadn't arrested, pulled his black truck, which doubled as Hallows's only police vehicle, into one of the few parking spaces outside The Watchtower minutes before midnight. As the senior officer of Hallows's police department, he took it upon himself to do the nightly patrol at least three nights a week. It was his least favorite part of the job, but he figured it was only fair he did his share.

The nightly drive around the community was usually a mixture of sleep-inducing boredom punctuated by the odd moment of excitement caused by underage louts hollering drunkenly in the streets. Sometimes trolls went on a rampage, tossing cars at each other. However, The Watchtower remained one of his regular stops.

The building was as old as Hallows itself, built as a fort to protect the magical refugees in the New World. Made of locally quarried stone, it stood at the end of Upper Winkle Wynd, a back-end street on a little ridge above downtown Hallows. As a child, Jake had fancifully imagined The Watchtower was a great stone dragon, the tower its neck and head. When the fireplace at its base blazed with flames, its warning beacon would be its fiery breath.

In Hallows's early years, that flame must have glowed a comforting red for all to see. As time passed and the people of Hallows used their unique abilities to create other means of protection, the importance of The Watchtower's beacon faded. Yet it remained a cherished symbol of the community. No longer a military building, its role changed. The round tower with its central chimney shaft became a cozy caretaker's apartment. Over the subsequent three hundred years, a long line of caretakers had run the large room below as a beloved restaurant.

Jake remembered his parents bringing his brother, Keon, and him as children for Samhain and Christmas celebrations here. The chatelaine had then been his deputy Mae Beth's aunt, Miss Betty of the Fae clan. Her chicken and dumplings were legendary.

Miss Betty had departed long ago. Jake sighed sadly. To Florida, he'd heard, to play slots. Improbably, she'd entrusted the restaurant to Casey Finnegan's care. Even Mae Beth had questioned her aunt. Casey Finnegan was an ancient leprechaun, round-faced, short, and wide, a cigar butt eternally clenched in his teeth, a merry twinkle in his black eyes. The only things louder than he were the garish waistcoats and jackets he wore. He was fonder of Irish whiskey than of maintaining his business. Casey was another of Jake's drunken louts and spent at least three Saturdays a month in jail, usually for wandering drunken and naked back to Hallows after he closed up for the night instead of going upstairs to his own apartment.

Under Casey's tenure The Watchtower had become tired. The magnificent stone fireplace was rarely used. Bare fluorescent lights, battered tables, and the distinctive stench of fried bacon and burnt, stale coffee spoke of a place that had lost hope. Customers sought its anonymity. No questions, just cheap food fast. And Irish whiskey served without question to those underage drunks.

Jake could understand the drunken part, fond as he was of beer himself, but portly Casey really should keep his clothes on. Visiting the diner at this time of night, and especially tonight, on a Saturday before closing time, was a preemptive strike.

A pity, though. The Watchtower had been a great institution with its panoramic view of the village. The bones were still there: that chimney, the large windows on the perimeter overlooking the outdoor stone patio and the village, the hardwood floors of the restaurant, the

French Empire crystal chandeliers, the white marble counter and vintage hardware of the long bar. He felt a pang of regret every time he visited and saw the restaurant fallen so low.

Swinging out of his vehicle, he was surprised by the quiet. Usually, he could hear Casey drunk-singing “Whiskey in the Jar” or “Black Velvet Band” from inside. Silence meant he was facedown by the bar, naked and drunk. He rubbed his beard and prepared himself as he flung open the door.

As Jake paused inside the doorway of The Watchtower and stared up the stepladder in his way, he became very glad he’d taken the late shift. Instead of Casey, a young woman stood on the top rung, straining to clean the cobwebs from the ceiling. It might not be politically correct to stand and leer, but he wasn’t going to apologize.

She had long legs under her white waitressing outfit. Great legs. Creamy skin. The sensible shoes didn’t detract from the delicate ankles. However, it was her glorious backside that held his gaze. Round, curved. Like a peach. He was a bit of a connoisseur. This ass was spectacular.

The rest of her was hard to see, as she was standing above him. He was about to introduce himself when she turned on the top rung. She caught sight of him, recoiled, and overcorrected. The duster flew out of her hand. She tottered. The ladder danced on its legs. Quickly, he reacted. He caught the ladder and steadied it. His body crushed her against the metal rungs.

Sasha could only gasp in terror as her body swayed and the ladder stuttered. The big stranger wrestled with the ladder. With his muscular body, he kept her from falling. Her heart pounding against her chest, she clutched the ladder.

For a moment, they stood, his face against her back, his arms outstretched around her. His fingers lightly brushed the underside of her breasts. Her backside was pillowed on his chest. She felt his breath on her neck. The urge to lean back overwhelmed her. Her body weakened with unexpected desire.

Shakily, she steadied her voice. “Thank you. I’m good.”

He said, “Let me help you down.”

“No, I’m good.” Sasha assumed he would move aside and allow her to descend. Instead, shockingly, his strong hands circled her waist. His grip tightened. Her body rubbed closely against his with each step down. When she reached the floor and turned, she found herself pressed against the ladder, his hands holding her as if in an embrace, his mouth against her hair.

For a moment, she remained that way. She breathed in his unique smell, a mix of woody scent and his own masculinity, and warmed herself by his heat. She felt her body react, her breasts peaking into hard nubs. Her breath grew ragged with a surge of fiery desire, a hot ball of need that she hadn’t ever felt for her former fiancé. Or anyone else. Liquid pooled between her clenching thighs, soaking her sexy lingerie.

She wanted him. It was crazy. Dangerous. Instant. She wanted his hands twisting in her curls. She wanted to yank his hard mouth to her lips. She needed his fingers stroking up her legs, caressing her swollen labia, circling the throbbing clit, and pushing inside and giving her pleasure.

He stepped back reluctantly. She had to stifle a little whimper of loss. Briefly, she kept her eyes closed and felt the thunderous pounding of her heart.

He tipped his hat at her before doffing it respectfully. “Sheriff Jakob Wulfrik, at your service. Call me Jake. Sorry to scare you like that.” Even his voice was big, a deep, gravelly baritone.

“I’m fine. Startled a little.” She cursed the huskiness in her voice. “Nice to meet you, Sheriff. I’m Sasha. Sasha Petrie.” Too much. Too quick. “Welcome to The Watchtower.

“Welcome to Hallows, Sasha Petrie.” His low voice stirred the smoldering embers of desire.

She coughed and stepped back. “I was about to close up.” She grabbed the duster and lifted the ladder before he could help, and quickly disappeared behind the counter and into the backroom to dispose of them. Maybe he’d take the hint and leave. No such luck.

He called after her. “The Watchtower is on my rounds. I like to keep an eye on it. I was hoping for a coffee.” Jake smiled at the quickly smothered frown on her striking face when she returned. She plastered on a professionally bright smile. He knew who she was, of course. Her arrival last week had caused great consternation. The various peoples of Hallows did not like Outcomers, and James Sampson had been censured by the council for bringing her to Hallows rather than taking her away from it. This hadn’t bothered the Sampsons. He’d heard Amelia had gotten the woman a job with Casey. Figured. Same clan. As the matriarch, Amelia had many connections.

Amelia Sampson wanted her here. Hence her job with Casey. Jake’s own clan wanted the Outcomer gone. He as sheriff was caught in the middle.

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He was not what she expected.

Sasha had heard about the chief law enforcement officer of Hallows. According to William and Amelia, Sheriff Wulfrik was a man of honor and principle. Like most people in Hallows, his family had settled here generations ago. His father and grandfather had been sheriff before him. Jake was known for enforcing the laws fairly and honestly, yet with compassion. Amelia liked him for his calm way with the vulnerable and wounded. James said he was a good man in a fight, dependable. And here he was.

As she came back to the white marble counter, she made her own observations.

Overall, a confident man. Relaxed. Sexy. Very different from Edward. Who knew confidence could be sexy? But for her, it signaled someone to be avoided. She was glad of the marble counter between them.

It was foolish to feel attracted to him so instantly, but she couldn't deny the lingering warm glow as she watched him move with a predatory grace to the battered bar and take a seat on a stool, putting his hat and coat on the neighboring stool. She wasn't looking to attract him or anyone, and especially not the attention of the law. This job suited her. It paid her debts, protected her emergency funds, and allowed her to remain anonymous.

Sheriff Sexy would be a problem, she decided. She wanted him gone. He was too dangerous. She'd had too many poor experiences with police. They didn't listen. They hadn't helped. She had her own reasons for staying under the radar with this sheriff. This one might ask

questions. Damn, but he was good-looking. *Play it cool*, she told herself. *Act normal. Don't arouse any suspicions*. Not that looking at him didn't arouse something else.

She'd serve him and get him out of the restaurant as quickly as possible. Sasha smiled and held the coffeepot inquiringly. "Since you saved my life, the least I can do is get you some coffee. Or would that be considered bribing a law official?"

Jake grinned. "No, it's okay. Casey and I settle my tab at the end of the month. Just make a note in the little blue notebook beside the till."

Integrity was sexy, too. *Sasha, get a grip*, she told herself.

She filled a mug and pushed it toward him. Grimacing, Jake contemplated the coffee. "Well, caffeine is caffeine, and I've got four more hours of patrol, and paperwork too."

Confused, she watched as the sheriff added four full tablespoons of sugar and, bracing himself, took a sip.

"It's . . . ambrosia. Liquid velvet." Surprised, he looked at her. "It's good."

Stung, she snapped, "It better be. I made it myself."

"Usually Casey makes his last pot around dinnertime and lets it stew until closing. I expected tar-like sludge I could use to shingle a roof." His deep voice soothed her.

She studied him. "Do you normally take coffee with your sugar?"

He grinned roguishly at her. "No. Black . . . like my soul."

Sasha refused to be tantalized by a smile she suspected he'd used many times as a boy to get out of trouble. Instead, she poured him another cup. "If you don't mind, I'll get back to closing up shop." No more conversations.

"Where's Casey? I came to pick him up."

"Pick him up?"

"Yeah, by now on a Saturday, he's usually drunk and belligerent. It's easier to lock him up and let him sleep it off. We keep a cot in the holding cell made up just for him. Comfy duvet and sham pillowcases. The works."

Sasha refused to hear anything negative about the man who'd been nothing but kind to her since she started four days ago. She would have every Wednesday off and every Sunday morning as well. She earned a very generous hourly rate to work the late-night shift. Most of her pay went into her emergency stash. More importantly, he paid cash. No forms, no demands to see ID or a social security number. No employment searches that would turn up the truth about Sasha Petrie.

"Casey had a few," Sasha said. "I finally persuaded him I could handle the kitchen by myself. I got him to go upstairs to his apartment. I told him I'd lock up."

Jake blinked. "It's not like him to cut a night of drinking short. Could you maybe top up the coffee?" He smiled at the irritation she tried to hide under her smile.

A few remaining slices of pie were displayed under the glass cloche. The Watchtower wasn't known for baked goods. "You make the pie?" At her nod, he smiled again. "As good as the coffee?"

So much for hoping he'd finish the coffee and leave. The man knew how to turn on the charm, Sasha fumed, fighting his brilliant smile. "It's strawberry rhubarb sour cream and it's very good." *Keep your distance, Sasha*, she warned herself again. Hormones under control. Besides, she didn't like men with beards. So there. She turned to hide the warmth she was sure flushed her skin. Adding a dollop of locally made vanilla ice cream to a slice gave her time to calm her instinctive reaction.

She couldn't help but quiver with pleasure when he moaned at his first bite. Purely professional pride, she assured herself.

"Goddess, your pie's amazing."

She shrugged. "I've had some restaurant experience and Casey said he'd add it to the menu." Keep it short, she told herself. No information.

"I don't think I've had better." He dug in.

Jake studied her. Her exotic moss-green eyes barely hid her discomfort. Barely. Jake could almost see the gears turning in her head as she wondered what to do with him. Intriguing, this Outcomer was.

"Smart Casey. You're a baker?"

Sasha dodged the question by moving the creamers back to the walk-in fridge.

Jake forked up more crust and tried to hide his smile. He was amused. However, he was Kin, and his heightened senses could smell the distrust and uncertainty she tried to hide. As a sheriff and as a man he was used to people not liking him, but usually they took their time and got to know him first. Apparently, it wasn't him but his role as sheriff that bothered her. Very

interesting. He ate his pie and observed her. A memorable face with prominent cheekbones. That determined chin. She was strong, fierce. The way she watched him with those eyes was like a doe watching a wolf, cautious. Ready to bolt. Ready to fight. Or run.

Short hair the color of a bonfire, and he suspected a hot temper to match. Her voice was a surprise. Deeper than he expected, smoky, bluesy. A long, lean body, probably just shy of six feet. Pale, creamy skin. A light sprinkle of freckles along her cheek. He wondered if they were scattered as lightly along her body. Could he play connect the dots along her slender body with its subtle curves? The sheriff might check off her identifying features and add them to what he already knew about her. The man wanted to lay her down and lap her up.

When she reappeared, he probed again. "I'll bet this is an old family recipe."

She ignored him, as if too intent in her task to hear him. His eyes followed her as she wiped the counter. "How are you liking Hallows? You enjoying yourself here?" *Do you know our secrets, the type of people who are hidden here?* He pushed the thought hard against her mind.

"Everyone's been friendly. Aunt Amelia and her family have been kind." She looked at him as if to say, "Go away."

"I heard about your car." Jake's friend Sebastian Saint-Remy and his mages were scouting information about her.

Sasha sighed in exasperation. "Amelia got me this job to pay for some special part it needed. It was pretty affordable."

She strode away to wipe the tables and he watched her sneak several glances at him.

He smiled at her as she returned. “Good thing James rescued you. You’ll be able to get back on your way. Where were you headed?” *How did you find us? We’re not on any maps.*

Sasha reached for his plate. “Are you finished?”

He snatched it out of her hand. “A few more bites.” Nothing about her destination.

“I can hear from your accent you’re from up north. Philadelphia?” *Tell me more about you.*

“More coffee?” She held the coffeepot at a threatening angle. He shook his head and snuck a peek at her backside again as she poured the liquid down the sink. Magnificent.

He lowered his gaze when she glared at the pie on his plate. She had a bit of a temper. Obediently, he ate more pie and ice cream and finished his coffee. No information about her hometown either, and she was oddly resistant to his mental influencing. Very strange.

“You’re working here alone?” Thanks to the clan system, Hallows had a low crime rate but The Watchtower was in an out-of-the-way part of town.

Sasha shrugged. “It’s no big deal. Casey’s nephew, Seamus, is usually in the kitchen on a Saturday but he left early. It’s been really quiet tonight and it’s mostly short-order work anyway: burgers, fries, the odd club sandwich. Not really fancy.” She refused to think of danger here. She’d faced worse.

“You’re alone here. How you getting home?”

“I’d have used my car, but Amelia doesn’t like me driving home at this time of night.” The needed Mustang part had finally arrived and her beloved car was fixed and now at Amelia’s. James and William had tidied up the garage so the vintage vehicle could be safely lodged inside.

“James or William will swing around and pick me up as usual.” She pursed her lips at the trouble she knew she’d caused the Sampson men. But neither one would cross indomitable little Amelia. Mind you, she didn’t want to offend her either. She’d reluctantly agreed to the arrangement; James and William took turns coming to get her after midnight each night.

“Well, since I’m here, I can take you home instead. You said you were closing up, right?”

He was too sexy and too nosy. “No, it’s fine. No, you go. James should be here soon. If not, I’ll just walk home.”

Sheriff Jake reached over the counter and helped himself to the phone he knew was there. From memory, he punched a number. “Hey, James, Jake here. I’m at the Watchtower . . . Yeah, I’m talking with her now. You should try the pie here. The strawberry rhubarb . . . You’ve had it? Yeah, it’s fantastic. Anyway, since I’m here, how about I drop Sasha off? . . . No, no trouble at all.” He raised an eyebrow at Sasha, who was torn between outrage at his high-handedness and relief that James wasn’t inconvenienced. “I’ll see you on Tuesday night. Make sure the card deck is new this time.” He chuckled at something the other man said. The conversation over, he clicked off. “Easy.”

“You really don’t need to do this.”

“It’s my public duty. Serve and protect.”

“Sheriff and part-time taxi driver too,” she said, teasing, and he looked transfixed. His spoon scraped the plate. His pie was finished.

She reached to clear his empty cup and plate. Impulsively, he took her right hand. He examined her long slender fingers, her ornate thick silver ring, and her pale manicure. His fingers

caressed each finger; his thumb traced the curves of her palm, suggesting how he would stroke her body.

Languid desire spread smoothly down her spine and pooled into her loins. She knew she should free herself. She should deliver some caustic comment. Instead, her body warmed as each stroke of his fingers burned. He hadn't even kissed her yet, but she was out of breath. He curled his hand around hers and tugged her toward him.

She bent like willow bowing in the wind. Her lips parted for that elusive kiss, and briefly her eyes closed. Then, regretfully, slowly, she stepped back, her head shaking gently.

“Coward,” Jake whispered huskily. He lifted her hand to his lips before relinquishing it.

“Wise,” she retorted.

“Running away,” he said, taunting her gently.

“No.” Sasha shrugged. “But discretion is the better part of valor. You’re cute and all, but I don’t do casual affairs and I’m not in town long enough for anything more. All I’m serving up here is pie.”

“Ah, too bad. I’d like more of your . . . pie. I won’t push. If you change your mind . . .” He sighed when she shook her head. “Well, while you’re being discreet and brave, I’ll get you home.”

“You don’t need to.”

“I’m not having Aunt Amelia on my tail because I let you walk home at midnight. You’re perfectly safe with me.” No one denied the matriarch’s wishes.

Somehow safe wasn't a word she would use in connection with him. After she finished cleaning, she let him guide her outside, and he waited patiently for her to lock the restaurant door. He handed her up into his truck. As promised, he was a gentleman on the way back to the Sampson home. Yet she felt the heat from his body and knew she would need all the discretion and valor she had during the short while she remained in Hallows.

