

**INFERNAL REVENUE**  
**The afterlife has a balance sheet**  
**By Eden Crowne**  
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**Week Four**

**CHAPTER EIGHT: Mud Raking**

Zayn popped up and peered over the counter. “Is it safe?”

I made flapping motions with my arms and clucked like a chicken.

The flames in his horns popped up a couple of inches. “Your mouth is a menace,” he grumbled.

I flapped my arms some more.

Sticking out his tongue, he picked up the box from Philippa and tossed it at me. Not to me, *at me*.

I caught it and stuck my tongue out right back at him.

Removing a cell phone and a set of keys, I threw the box at Zayn as he returned to his place at the counter. It hit him in the head.

He spun, squaring his shoulders.

I made a ‘bring it!’ motion.

Luckily before this could escalate, the front door chimes jingled and a group of boys and girls walked in chattering.

Graves motioned for Alistair and me to follow him to the opposite corner.

Graves said. “She warned us off the case, just like Inverness said she would.”

“Look, I know I’m the new kid on the block, but even I got a weird vibe from that conversation. Is it because...who’s the Alpha team again?”

“Raoul and Veronique,” supplied Alistair.

“Right, because she wants Raoul and Veronique to get the credit on their balance sheet?”

Graves nodded. “Possible. If they file the report, they get the credit. As does Philippa.”

Maybe in my alive state I was a sneaky person because I had a very sneaky idea. “Or they don’t file the report and they all get something else.”

Two pairs of eyes locked on mine.

“Dead or alive, it’s all about money, power, or love. Your Blue-Da-Ba-Dee-Da demon king said the horse-racing thing was going on behind his back. That makes it a money or power play. Perhaps your uptown pals know exactly what’s going on. They could be betting not on horses to win, but horses to lose.” I shrugged. “Though I’m not sure that’s a thing.”

Alastair's tail swung rapidly back and forth. "It is a thing. You can make yourself a bookie, taking bets, and when the punters lose, you keep the money."

"So it's a thing."

"Very much so. You could also bet on a spread for which horses will finish," he added.

"Your girl Philippa might have expensive tastes," I hypothesized. "She was driving an Audi."

Alistair's long, green gator face twisted into a frown of indignity. "She is *not* my girl."

Graves made a "*Phfffft*," sound. "Don't make that face, Alistair. That hero-worship complex of yours kicked in the first time you met her."

"No, no," Alistair spluttered. "I...I admire her. That's all. She's a Nephilim. That's a bit of heaven right in the room."

"Hero worship complex," Graves repeated pursing his lips.

I ran 'N' words through my soggy memory banks. Napalm. Yes. Neophyte. Yes. Neutron. Yes. Nephilim? Nope.

"What's a Nephilim?" I asked.

"Half-angel, half-human. Philippa is a Nephilim. All the liaisons for the Earthbound are."

"*Whaaaf?* Angels and humans do the deed?" I was caught between fascination and total gross out.

Graves frowned. "Not part of this conversation."

"You're right," I nodded. "How about Raoul and Veronique? Maybe they have expensive tastes like their boss."

"They're dead," Alistair protested.

"Dead like us, right?" I said.

Alistair and Graves nodded.

"Well, at this moment I want a new comforter, pillows, and throw rug for that dismal room upstairs. Something in the chinoiserie style."

"What's chinoiserie?" Alistair asked looking confused. It is possible for alligators to look confused.

"Western take on classic Chinese designs. Chinese Chippendale. Expensive. Plenty of knock-offs, though," I recited.

"Oh," said Graves. "Um, I see."

How did I know this? Maybe I was an interior decorator instead of a plastic surgeon. Despite the fact I noticed nostrils.

"To continue. Who's to say tomorrow I won't want a Gucci belt? Oh," I smiled, "I remember what Gucci is, too! Yay!" I clapped my hands. "Anyway, they are down here, like all of you..."

"Us," corrected Alistair.

I frowned. Not sure I was ready to be a part of Club Dead yet. “Yeah, yeah, okay. And our accounts are in the red. From what I understand, that means they, *we* didn’t start off as little Mary Sunshine. Didn’t you guys ever think about profiting from this gig?”

From the looks on their faces, I gathered they had not. How sweet.

“Perhaps they got tired of the righteous penance act and decided to enjoy their time. Splitting the difference between good deeds and bad.”

“How could they hide it?” Alistair asked.

I gave him a look. “Who’s to say they did?”

Alistair’s heavy tail swiped back and forth nearly knocking over a couple of chairs.

Graves had his arms crossed over his broad chest and was looking out the picture window. A BMW pulled into one of the slots out front and a couple of women walked to the nail salon next door.

“Philippa is their caseworker as well as ours,” he said at last.

“That fact has been established,” I said with a sarcastic twang.

The bells above the door jingled again as the two muscular guys left with their giant green smoothies.

“Inverness had doubts about Raoul and Veronique,” Zayn said, joining us. The flames in his horns were fading to an amber glow. “That’s why he was investigating this on his own, only telling us when he was sure something was wrong at the racetrack.”

“And then he was gone,” added Graves.

I held up my hands, “Could someone tell me what happened to this Inverness guy? You’ve been making dark references to his disappearance since I met you.”

“You make it sound like so long ago,” said Alistair swishing his thick tail. “I don’t think twenty-four hours have even passed.”

“And what a full day it has been!” I said acidly.

“We don’t know what happened,” Graves cut in. “Inverness said he was going to the track. He was concerned about the deaths, as I said before. He believed if we went in a group, it would draw attention. We agreed to meet later at the Bubble Tea place.”

“He never came, I am guessing.”

“Correct,” Graves continued. “We went to the track after dark and searched. We spent three days looking for any clue. We found the body in the stable but no sign of Inverness. Around that time, we got the message about a new team member. So…” he let the sentence trail.

“One in, one out,” Zayn said returning from the counter.

“Bethel claims it was not him and I believe him. There was no reason to stage that meeting at the Arboretum just for our benefit. As he pointed out, we’re the low men on the demon-slaying totem pole.”

I popped my eyes. “We’re the what?”

“Totem pole.” Graves pursed his lips in a frown. “Low man on the totem pole. You know. Don’t people say that anymore?”

“No, Daniel Boone,” I snorted. “But maybe it can work to our advantage.”

## CHAPTER NINE: Horsing Around

The stands and grounds were crowded, the sun shining and the temperature a comfortable seventy degrees. Alistair did a victory dance as his horse, Walk on Water, galloped to victory in the fifth race.

Graves growled a warning and I elbowed Alistair in the ribs. “Blind, remember, you’re blind.”

He pulled his dark glasses halfway down and peered at me over the black rims, “Why do you keep hitting?”

“Because you’re an idiot.”

The blind man-and-seeing eye dog-scam was probably not the best choice for someone who liked to play the horses as much as Alistair appeared to. He threw a hissy fit when Graves attempted to drag him away from the betting window and the fact he had a racing sheet tucked in his jacket pocket did not help the illusion.

Although the racecourse allowed licensed service dogs, they had the right to refuse entry to any dog. Since Graves was the size of a bear, he looked fully capable of eating the racehorses. But a seeing-eye dog? Who’s going to kick out a blind man?

I had a pair of binoculars around my neck, much good they were. I didn’t even know what our rival demon-slayers Raoul and Veronique looked like. If they were who I was even searching for. Meanwhile, Alistair kept surreptitiously checking his racing sheet and dragging Graves to the betting window.

The charade was getting ridiculous. I grabbed the sunglasses off Alistair’s face and picked up Graves’ harness. “Let’s go bloodhound. Sniff out some trouble.”

Graves seemed only too glad to get away. His nose led us to a tunnel that carried race goers beneath the track onto the expansive fenced infield area.

He’d picked up a scent all right.

The scent of Craft beer.

The infield was hosting a beer and food festival with live music thrown in for extra fun because why not? The fact at least one murder had been uncovered last night was either being kept quiet or nobody cared.

Beer stands and a dozen colorful food trucks were parked in a line: Korean, lobster rolls, BBQ, Mexican, burgers, and more. Yum. Now here’s a trail I could get behind.

The cell phone the curvaceous Philippa brought came with money loaded into the micropayment app. Not an ungenerous amount that surprised the heck out of me.

Graves and I sidled up to one of the beer vendors and checked out the menu. He could read, of course. I pointed at the beers in turn as the tap guy stared.

Graves decided on Alaskan Amber and I chose a double IPA purely on its high alcohol content.

I paid with my new phone feeling normal and not-dead until I looked at Graves and remembered I was walking around Santa Anita Park looking for dead people with the wolfman.

But there was beer.

Beer made everything better. And very soon a double order of truffle fries with extra salt joined the drinks.

We settled at one of the flimsy white plastic table and chair sets scattered around the seating area.

I took a sip of the IPA. My face flushed and my fingers tingled.

“Graves! I like beer.”

He was in mid-lap — I’d procured a bowl for him — and he gave me a cock-eyed *WTF* wolf look.

Relief flooded through me. “No. I mean I remember liking beer. A lot! That’s good, isn’t it? Remembering?”

His big doggy eyes half-closed and he nodded, woofing, I think, in agreement.

We drank out beer, ate our fries, and then had another round of both.

The noise from the crowd in the stands and over the loudspeakers was buzzy in a pleasant way. The country and western band played enthusiastically. Alistair did not call so I assumed he was betting his little salary away.

We sat in the sun and if people wondered why my giant dog was drinking beer, they did not approach. Lifting Alastair’s sunglasses and regarding the hulking brute panting on the grass, the sunlight glinting off his big, sharp teeth, I wouldn’t have asked either. I probably would have bought him a round.

Speaking of... “Don’t forget you owe me for your beer, dog.”

Phone in hand, I sipped the last of my beer and flipped through screens, sighing in frustration. I was researching what career I was best suited for via an online quiz. This one focused on picking movies. Your choice of films pointed to your best career. I was not having much luck since I couldn’t remember most of the films they mentioned.

I should go back to the one about desserts. Sweets were more visceral, less memory based. Oh, visceral. Big word.

I stuck my phone back in my pocket sighing. None of these tests had helped me figure out who or what I had been. My own theories about Private Eye, psychologist, and cosmetic surgeon seemed just as valid as any.

Graves got to his feet, his head swiveling back and forth, ears pricked forward, tail up. A growl started low in his throat, and he spun to face me.

“*Rrrrrrool*,” he howled.

I stared at him. “What?”

“*Rrrrroool*,” he said again, turning his big head from me to the track and back. “*Rrrrroool! Rrrrroool!*” Louder and longer.

Okay, I get it. A ‘Timmy’s in the well,’ moment. With no Alistair to translate, I didn’t know what I was supposed to do.

He paced off several steps and back urging me to follow.

That, I could do. I picked up the handle to the harness and he took off.

“Crap!” I yelped, jerked into a run and trying to keep up.

We barreled back through the tunnel to the main grounds. All I could do was hold on as people around us got shoved or jumped out of the way. Their surprised or horrified expressions telling the story of what we must have looked like: runaway seeing eye dog with his helpless master blundering along.

“Excuse me, excuse me, pardon me,” I chanted.

Up ahead I saw someone, a man, turn to look. There was a moment of recognition as he took in the giant black wolf.

He gave a jump of surprise and sped off.

“*Rrrrroool*,” Graves howled. “*Rrrrroool! Rrrrroool!*”

Wait.

“Raoul?” I asked.

Graves snarled and ran faster.

Got it. Raoul was here. Perhaps collecting or spending his ill-gotten gains from the demon and racehorse scam. Nevertheless, giving chase and howling at the top of his wolfy lungs hardly seemed like the best way to observe and gather intel on this caper.

Grave had announced his presence with the first howl.

And could you blame Raoul? Even if I hadn’t done anything bad, one look at Graves’ open jaws and I would have run like the devil.

A few people started running after me with shouts of, “Do you need help?” Or “Wait, wait! Look out!”

We outdistanced them quickly.

Raoul zigged and zagged unable to lose his four-footed pursuer. We approached the parade ground where horses are trotted out before the race and the winner took their giant floral wreath and posed for pictures after.

Raoul vaulted the fence like an Olympic hurdler.

The horses were understandably startled by this though their reaction was nothing compared to what followed.

Horses are at least used to people. Giant black wolves somewhat less so.

I finally lost my hold on his harness as Graves sailed over the railing, landing soundlessly in the soft, thick soil.

A humongous animal running between its legs is what equine nervous breakdowns are made of. Therefore, the horses in the parade paddock decided the best course of action in this situation would be a complete freak-out.

They reared and whinnied, raking the air with steel-shod hooves. Jockeys tumbled; grooms were pulled off their feet. Humans cursed and horses snorted the equine equivalent.

I felt like dropping a few juicy curses myself but figured thunder and lightning would not be a welcome addition to the mayhem.

Graves twisted hard to the left as one of the horses spun in a circle. The animal's enormous rump smacked me in the chest and I fell to my knees. My dark glasses went flying.

The horse spun all the way around and instead of trampling me, stuck its nose in my face and began to nuzzle my hair. I looked at it.

A big Chestnut.

"Horsey!" I said in recognition.

It whinnied back, rubbing its fuzzy cheek against mine.

Graves had completed the obstacle course of long-legged thoroughbreds and was already up and over the fence.

Damn.

I gave the Chestnut's velvety nose a quick stroke. "Later kiddo! We're on a case. Win the race!"

I got to my feet to hightail it after Graves when I remembered the demons and their horse-sucking ways.

"Don't die, horse!" I added before pushing my way through the shouting and confusion.

I scooted under the fence rail.

Graves' trail was easy to pick up. All I had to do was follow the screaming.

I slowed as I passed the Sea Biscuit statue wishing I had not drunk that second beer. Then it was out the main gates and into the enormous parking lot.

Hot sun glinted blindingly off thousands of windshields. Squinting, I shaded my eyes, shouting, "Graves! Where the fuck are you!"

Thunder rumbled overhead.

Crap!

"Where the heck are you! Heck, heck, heck!" I amended.

A drawn-out howl echoed on my left and a distant cacophony of squawking erupted on my right. I looked to the right first.

A black cloud was speeding across the parking lot.

Clouds do not normally squawk. I was sure of that. Memory loss or no memory loss.

I clenched my inner bits. The need to pee was approaching as fast as the dark cloud. You only rent beer.

Graves howled again and I caught a glimpse of him two rows ahead before the shadow dropped like a bomb.

There was only time to exclaim, “What the...” before feathered bodies exploded into motion. I was surrounded in a whirlwind of beaks and claws. They banged into me with bruising force. I choked, trying to get a breath through the pain. “Fight!” My brain reminded me. “Weapons.”

I’d automatically covered my face with my arms. Keeping one arm in place, I pushed against the onslaught of feathered bodies to reach my weapons. My fingers closed on something hard and smooth and I jerked it off the catch. It was small. The phone charger.

Good? Bad? I didn’t even know what it did. Time to find out.

Rolling the cylinder desperately under my thumb, I found the slight depression for the ‘on’ button and pressed it. A crackle and snap of energy lit up the birds around me like firecrackers.

*Pop, pop, pop*, and they were nothing but singed feathers.

Windmilling my arm, I connected with as many birds as I could, my thumb pressed to the button. Acrid smoke and the smell of burning crows clogged the air. Ragged strips of singed flesh and bone clung to me but they just kept coming. I tried to move closer to one of the cars for cover and slipped on what had to be crisped crow carcasses. I fell on my ass knocking into a large, furry body.

Graves hopped over my legs, protecting me from the worst of the onslaught. With one arm still over my face, I aimed the phone charger up, away from Graves. Nasty crunching sounds meant Graves was biting his way through the onslaught.

I kept zapping and he kept biting but the crows kept coming.

A roaring sound sent my heart into my throat. I had my head down and my eyes tightly closed as I flailed around with the stun gun.

‘Please, not more birds,’ I thought.

The roaring I quickly realized was not birds. It, *they*, were words. A kind of chant that boomed like big bass speakers at a concert. Daring to open my eyes and peep out from between my fingers I saw what had to be a sound wave traveling at ramming speed right at us.

The wave hit and broke, knocking Graves and me head over heels. We tumbled across the hot tarmac bouncing off the sides of vehicles like ping pong balls. I’d lost my hold on the phone charger —

like the flashlight, it was on a retractable cord — and slammed my hand against the cars and pickups trying to grab hold of something.

Crows flapped their wings in my face, cawing in panicked squawks as they fought the wave.

My fingers closed around what had to be the underside of a bumper and I held on. The power surge wrenched my arm backward and I swore like a sailor. Luckily the noise of the birds must have drowned out my voice

I reached out as Graves slid by grabbing his tail at the last possible moment.

He yelped but I held on.

‘*Sorry!*’ I thought because I had no breath to speak.

Car alarms whooped and hollered. The pull gradually lost its punishing force and finally passed us by. I took a deep breath and saw the energy wave carry the flock of crows in the direction of the 210 Freeway, tumbling a few cars as it went.

Alistair came running across the parking lot, shaking a fist. “I see you, you bastard,” he shouted.

Was he talking to me?

“Not my fault,” I squeaked as he approached.

“Raoul called the crows,” he said, “Over there! I see him. Pull yourself together, man.”

I assumed he was talking to Graves who I saw was lying on his side, muzzle covered in blood and feathers, his long red tongue out, chest heaving. I still had a death grip on his tail and let go.

Laboriously he got to his feet as Alistair pulled me to mine.

“Raoul has winded himself from that spell. Come on!”

He ran around the car with Graves at his heels. I limped along behind in the world’s lamest imitation of a run. I was moving my arms like I was running, sort of. My feet barely cleared the tarmac.

Alistair and Graves soon stopped. Thank heavens.

They appeared to have lost the slippery Raoul.

Graves popped up on his hind legs making him around nine feet tall. He balanced there, turning his head from side to side, searching.

Creepy beyond belief.

“*Rowrf!*” Graves pointed with a paw.

I followed the paw’s direction and did indeed see a tall, dark-haired man jump into a fancy electric blue muscle car.

“I see him,” said Alistair, already on the move.

Raoul hopped in the car. He gave us a jaunty wave out of the open driver’s side window and turned the ignition.

The car exploded into a massive fireball.

