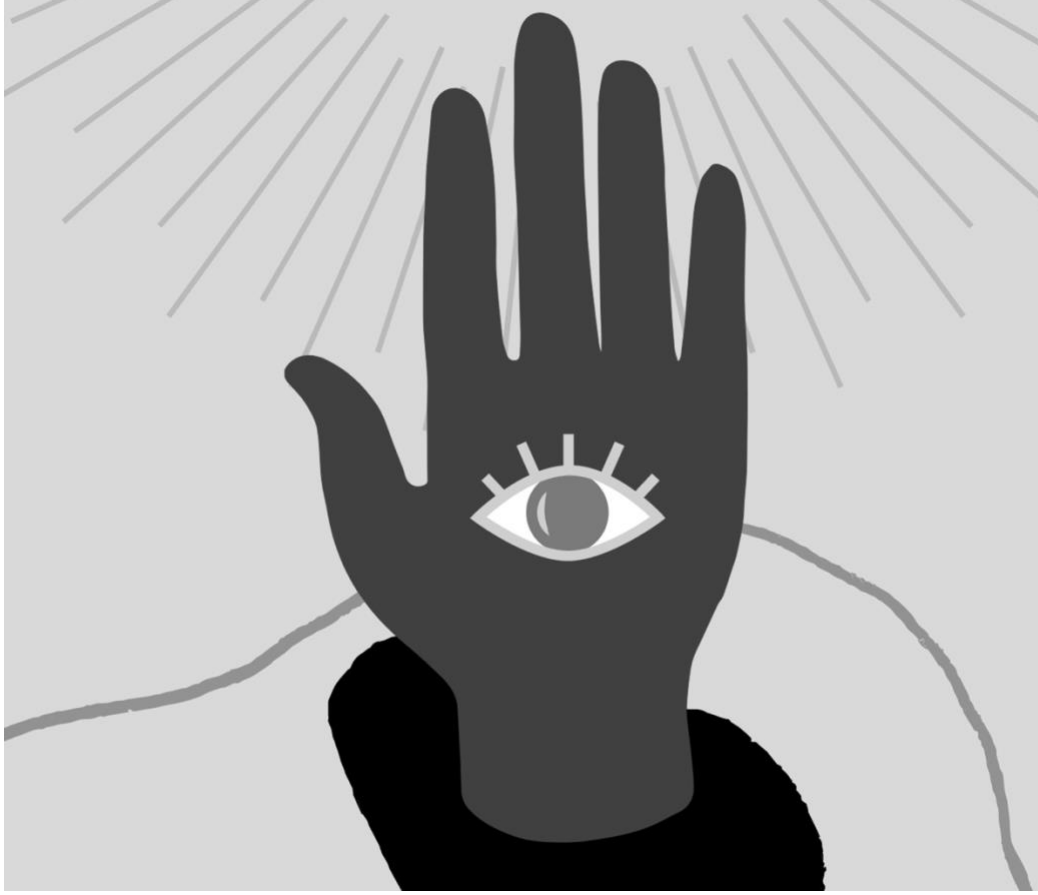
INFERNAL REVENUE

The Afterlife Has a Balance Sheet

EDEN CROWNE



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CHAPTER ONE: Death and Taxes

I woke up dead, sitting on a fake Corbusier chair with the fall fashion issue of *Madame et Homme* in my lap and a number in my hand that said 91602.

The sequence of events before that is a bit hazy. I remembered a sharp pain in my chest...a splash of red on my shirt…the floor rushing up at my face and then…I was dead. Don't ask me how I knew. I just did. There is a big crevasse between living and dead, somehow you know which side you're standing on.

It took me a few moments to blink my surroundings into focus after the initial rush into consciousness or whatever state I had been in.

I looked left.

I looked right.

And then again.

There were hundreds of chairs stretching out on either side in a line as far as I could see. Each chair identical to mine.

Every chair had a man or woman in it.

Every sort of man.

Every sort of woman.

All holding the same glossy magazine.

The chairs lined a corridor of white scuffed linoleum, white walls that looked in need of a good cleaning, white acoustic panels in the ceiling (ditto), and industrial-grade fluorescent lighting that was far too bright.

"I don't even like fashion!" shouted a heavyset guy sitting two fake Corbusier chairs away and making me jump.

He had a farmer's tan and was wearing a plaid shirt, jeans, and an Atlanta Braves cap.

Not like fashion? No surprise there.

He flung the magazine on the floor.

A dozen heads turned to stare, mine included.

He gave the magazine a mighty kick and it skittered across the linoleum coming to rest against a raised desk.

I hadn't noticed the desk until now.

The magazine levitated, floated back to the guy in the Atlanta Braves cap; and settled in his lap.

We all watched to see what he would do next.

He grabbed the magazine and flung it even harder so that it flew over the desk and hit the wall behind.

After a moment, the magazine levitated but this time shot across the room like a rocket and smacked the guy in the forehead with an audible *thump*.

The guy slumped in his chair, legs splayed, arms limp. The magazine settled quietly in his lap.

The others returned to staring straight ahead or at their hands. No one even opened the magazine. And it was the Fall issue!

I looked back at the desk. I could see things much clearer now. As though a low-lying fog had lifted. Two computer monitors from the age of the dinosaurs peeked up over the raised front of the counter. Two poofs of ash blond hair faced the monitors, their backs to us.

Taking my magazine, I walked briskly to the desk, stood on my tiptoes, and peeked over

A woman and a man sat in black desk chairs staring at the screens. One Asian, one white, both with teased blond hair piled high as State Fair cotton candy. They were dressed in matching pink button-down shirts and canary yellow pants.

I slammed my magazine down and they twisted around in their swivel chairs to look at me with identical bored expressions.

Even their lip gloss matched — pink, like their shirts.

"Just what is going on here!" I demanded.

The white plastic name tags on their shirts said 'Shirley.' Both tags.

"Just what's going on here, Shirley," I amended.

Shirley No.1, the guy, ignored me, turning back to his monitor.

Shirley No.2 picked up a pencil, pierced her overly teased updo, and scratched her head.

"I would like," I said in a slow measured voice, "to know why I am dead and where I am."

She didn't roll her eyes but just about. "Honey, where do you think you are?" Her voice had a thick southern drawl.

I looked around; the defeatism was palpable. Uncannily like the DMV.

"A waiting room?" I guessed.

"That's right. Now sit yourself back down and *wait*."

Shirley No.1 snorted a laugh.

"Just when *is* my turn?" I slapped the desk with my magazine again stretching up and craning my neck to look at her monitor screen. She moved in front of it, but I caught a glimpse. She was playing Ms. Pac Man.

The veins in my temples began to throb.

“Look, I know I’m dead. Is it too much to ask what scenario we’re playing out here? Is this *Touched by an Angel*? *Heaven Can Wait*?” My brain felt spongy and I couldn’t think of any more angel movies.

Shirley No. 1 rendered my questions irrelevant when he barked out a hee-haw laugh, shouting, “Touched by an Angel! *Bwahahaha*! Touched by an... Oh, my stars, I have to pee!”

He jumped up and disappeared through a sliding door in the adjacent wall.

Shirley No.2 was doubled over with laughter and used her pencil to point to an oversized number board on the wall.

How could I not have noticed it? It was one of those massive old-fashioned card-style models where the numbers go *clickety-clack-click-click* as they flip.

As if on cue, they began flip-flip-flipping. There had to be a hundred lines and triple that number of windows all spinning around and around.

The flip-flapping stopped abruptly. Only one line opened at the very top.

‘Now serving number: 666,’ it read.

Shirley No.2 picked up a bulky handheld metal microphone from her desk and drawled, “Number 666. Number 666. Proceed to Window 12.”

Someone way down the corridor gave a whoop of joy.

Shirley No.2 set the microphone back in place whispering to herself. “She’s not going to be so happy once that door opens.”

Shirley No.1 popped back through the door, still giggling.

“Watch the board. We’ll call your number,” said Shirley No. 2.

I looked at my number, 91602.

Shirley No.1 leaned over the desk to follow my gaze and giggled more.

Oh no. That was not happening. I...um...what was my name? Shaking my head, I told myself, it doesn’t matter. Whoever I was, I know I did not wait in line behind anyone. Especially 91,601 other people. I’d paid my waiting-in-line dues ... *somewhere*.

Probably.

Maybe.

“I demand to know what this place is,” I used my imperious tone. At least I think it was that tone.

The Shirleys rolled their eyes at one another. Shirley No.2 pointed at a different spot. This one over my head.

“What?” I snarled.

She pointed again and I looked up.

A plastic sign hung off-center from a thin metal chain covered in dust. In black letters, it said:

Bureau of Undead Affairs. A Division of the Infernal Revenue Service

Have a nice afterlife.

There was a bright yellow smiley face at the end of the last line. Later I would blame the smiley face for what happened next.

It got ugly.

The 'F' word was thrown around a lot — mostly by me, I admit — both the monitors ended up on the floor and I think Shirley No. 2 might have been hit by a bolt of lightning that just came out of nowhere.

I was sprawled halfway over the top of the counter smacking Shirley No. 1 with my glossy magazine when two burly men the size of Big Foot appeared and grabbed me by the arms.

Many more choice words and colorful expressions would have fallen from my lips if one of them had not slapped a strip of duct tape over my mouth. I kicked them several times until they lifted me by the shoulders and held me off the floor out of range of my heels.

Kicking and screaming (muffled by the tape) they carried me along the endless corridor until I finally ran out of energy. Hysterics are tiring.

On and on they silently strode past hundreds — thousands? — of fake Corbusier chairs, each with a man or woman who stared as I was hauled across their line of vision.

We stopped at last in front of a door. No number, no name, no window. The door slid open with a SciFi-type *whoosh.*

They plonked me down in a hard metal chair and snapped shackles — not handcuffs, actual iron shackles — on my wrists. The shackles were anchored to a battered steel desk with a thick metal hook. The desk was bolted to the floor. I know this because I tried to pick it up and hurl it at the two men.

Before they exited they ripped off the duct tape. Shirley No.1 came click-clacking in on his heels, high-fiving the two men on their way out. He slapped the glossy magazine on the desk with a triumphant, "*Ha*!" and left.

And there I sat.

And sat.

And sat.

The chair was cold as a refrigerator crisper drawer and the chill spread from my tailbone up my spine. I was wearing a thin, mid-calf skirt in a tropical print from Keita Yamaguchi and one of his boxy white tees. How did I know a Keita Yamaguchi creation and not my name? No idea. But I certainly wish I'd had the forethought to die with a sweater on.

When the door finally slid open my teeth were chattering.

A man walked in. Average height, a little chubby, dark brown skin, full Afro, and a set of sideburns not seen in decades.

Not dissimilar to the South Beach bright colors of the Shirleys, he was dressed in maroon pants and a polyester shirt with a yellow and purple geometric print that made my eyes swim.

He had a donut in his mouth, what smelled like a cup of coffee in a Styrofoam cup in the one hand, and a clipboard with a bunch of dog-eared papers almost falling out in the other. He set the clipboard on the desk, kept hold of the coffee, and took a bite of his donut.

My stomach growled and my mouth watered.

Hunger appears to be a universal condition transcending even death. Honestly, I shouldn't be surprised. I feel like I was the sort of woman who'd been hungry since the onset of puberty.

"Mister Morgan..."

"Morgan!" I jumped at the name. "My name is Morgan!"

Of course, how could I forget?

Wait 'Mister'?

Remembering Shirley No.1 and his poufy hair, heels, and expertly applied lip gloss, I did a quick internal body check. I mean I *was* feeling a bit confused.

Nope, nope, and nope.

No dangling bits down there and regulation jiggly girl equipment up topside.

"I'm not a mister," I said irritably.

"What?" He looked at me, really looked this time, then checked the papers in his hand. "Says here..."

I pushed my shoulders back and wiggled my breasts. "Not a mister!" I said firmly.

"You're sure?" He appeared reluctant to accept the evidence and kept looking from me to the clipboard and back again.

"Do you want me to pee in a cup!" I snapped, attempting to stand but only managing an undignified crouch.

He shifted from foot to foot in agitation. "Hmmm. Must be a typo. All right. *Ms*. Morgan. You owe the Infernal Revenue Service..." He looked at the clipboard and whistled. "A lot! My goodness. You have been a very bad man. Uh, woman. Individual."

I plopped back in the chair. "What do you mean I owe the Internal Revenue Service money. I'm dead."

"Not Internal, *Infernal*. We are the Internal Revenue Service of the afterlife. Even death," he gave me a severe look, "has a balance sheet."

"What a load of crap!" was my answer to that.

“It isn’t a load of crap.” He seemed insulted.

“Sounds like it to me.”

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

I was about to snap out a reply then realized he had me there. I knew I was dead and I was in some sort of crazy office and shackled to a desk.

Tapping his clipboard with one finger, he said, “The Infernal Revenue Service, a division of the Bureau of Undead Affairs, collects on the spiritual debt you have accumulated during your life. Spiritual. Not material. Think of it as Karma playing catch-up.” He smiled a self-serving smile. If he’d been a little closer, I would have kicked him.

“The Bureau regulates this repayment process. Penance is assigned depending on how far in the red the account stands. Miss Morgan, this was all explained to you....”

“No,” I protested, rattling my manacles. “It was not!”

“...in Processing,” he finished, frowning.

“I haven’t been through any processing.” My voice cracked in frustration. “When I asked for answers, they hauled me in here.”

Shirley No.1 tip-tapped into the room on his heels. I hadn’t even heard the door swish open. He was carrying a square wooden box.

“Processing?” barked Seventies-Cop Guy. “Why wasn’t this soul processed?”

“She made a ruckus,” said Shirley No.1 looking down his nose at the other man. He was a big guy and the heels added several inches more to his already impressive stature.

The Guy held the clipboard up and shook his head, “Why did you have to make a ruckus? Shirley, please, can’t you maybe, you know, slip her back in the system?”

Shirley No.1 rolled his eyes. “Not gonna’ happen! We haven’t got time to put her back in the queue. Shirley and I are up to here,” he leveled his hand under his nose, “with Millennials and Hipsters.” He set the box on the table. “They’re like a medieval plague.”

“Millennials and Hipsters?” I asked, my brain feeling wet and spongy. “Did I hear him right?”

Shirley No.1 thrust out a hip and shook a finger at me. “Don’t talk about me in the third person. I am right here in all my glory. And yes, the Bureau is packed with them. The Millennials thought they were *sooooo* special.” He made a face showing precisely what he thought of that. *“*As the saying goes, ‘Karma is only a bitch if you are!’”

“I’m not sure that’s how it goes...”

He waved away my comment with a flip of his hand. “Whatever. Entitled you-know-what’s. Thinking they were too special to have to play nice. Ha! Where’s your gold stars now?”

“And the Hipsters?” I asked. Completely intrigued.

He sniffed. “The Hipsters are here because, yeah, fuck Hipsters.”

A rumble of thunder made the room tremble. Shirley No.1 looked up, “Oh you know you agree!” He looked back at me saying *sotto voce*, “A Man Bun alone is enough to earn a chair in the corridor no matter how many puppies and kitties they’ve fostered.”

He stepped back and gave me a quick up-down appraisal. “Oh, and honey? You should never wear Keita Yamaguchi. He makes you look fat.”

I lunged but the cuffs brought me up short and he was already out the door, wiggling his fingers goodbye.

“I’m not fat!” I yelled as the door swooshed shut.

Polyester Shirt Guy sighed and flipped through the pages on his clipboard. “Please sit down. Your Heavenly Case Worker is on her way so there isn’t much time. Short version. Yes, there is a God or Gods depending on your religious beliefs. Though not many.”

Confused, I asked, “Not many religious beliefs?”

“Gods. Not a lot of Gods.” He put a hand to one side of his mouth as if saying something confidential and whispered, “At least not anymore.” He glanced up, cleared his throat, and resumed. “Ahem. There are many places you can go after you die but first, you pass through judgment. Just like we always told you.”

He snapped his fingers. A photograph appeared on the wall next to a pie chart. I am five-foot-four, with shoulder-length black hair, parted at the side, green eyes, pert nose, great eyebrows. This much I remembered. Maybe not my address or birthday. But what I look like, I knew instinctively. At least now that I thought about it. And I am not fat.

The picture was of a burly, muscular man dressed in green camouflage fatigues, with an eyepatch and a black buzz cut.

“Now,” he tapped the wall, “this is you.”

“No, it fucking is not!” I protested, kicking back my chair forgetting again I couldn’t stand up. Thunder rumbled right above my head. I winced.

He looked at the picture, muttering under his breath. “Dang it!”

He snapped his fingers and a series of photos popped up one after the other: men, women. Tall, short, thin, fat. None of them was me.

“You and your ruckus! Okay, forget the photo.”

He scrolled through a dozen pie charts stopping at one labeled ‘Morgan’.

“There. Your record.” He tapped the clipboard and pointed at the wall. “Morgan.”

A sliver of the chart was in black. The rest was bright, damning scarlet. “This is why you are here.”

“Oh come on,” I protested. “I haven’t done anything so bad it would justify all of that!” At least I thought I hadn’t. Me, my life, everything before the white corridor and fake Corbusier chairs remained a blur. Nevertheless, the sheer amount of red on the chart pointed to a mass murderer or puppy killer.

Shaking his head, he made a “*Tch, tch, tch,”* sound as he tapped a finger at the clipboard. “Your definition of right and wrong, Ms. Morgan, is sadly out of synch with Heaven’s.”

The door whooshed open behind me and the guy snapped to attention.

“Madam Ophelia,” he said reverently.

CHAPTER TWO: You Owe, You Owe, it's Back to Earth You Go

A woman floated elegantly into the room. Really floated. Feet three inches above the ground. Not easy to float when you're seven feet tall, I thought to myself. Her red hair tumbled in dramatic curls with a long sweep of bangs floating ethereally just below her left brow. Her skin was milky white, and her blue eyes, nose, and mouth were in that graceful symmetry usually seen only in oil paintings.

She wore a jeweled headdress made of emerald and pearl medallions that fit over the top of her head. The medallions were held in place by chains of gold and larger medallions covered her ears. In the center of each large medallion was a peacock bursting with jewels. Her almost translucent gown of pale pastels floated just above the floor behind her.

The woman had an aura about her. And I am talking an actual aura.

A shimmering mandala of intricate geometric shapes flickered gently around her head in the ugly fluorescent light.

"Hello, hello, hello. I'm your Case Officer. How are you?"

Before I could answer she waved a careless hand, "Not that I care but it's polite to ask. If you hadn't made a ruckus and attacked Shirley, we would have been introduced earlier. You were naughty and wouldn't wait your turn." She laughed like champagne bubbles, light and effervescent. Her eyes, however, were not laughing. "I don't like naughty souls."

"You are all fucking crazy," was my response.

A rumble shook the room.

Her tear-drop-shaped nostrils flared delicately. "Language! No need for vulgarity."

"Yes, *yes* there is every need for vulgarity," I insisted stridently. "I'm dead. I get that. But what is this about spiritual debt? I never ..."

She held out her hand and my mouth shut. I tried to speak but couldn't.

"Clipboard."

Polyester Shirt Guy handed it over.

She gave it a quick once-over. "In processing, we would have explained there is much more than heaven and earth in this wonderful universe. The Mortal World, Demon Realms, the Shadowlands of the Afterlife — of which this," she made a sweeping gesture, "is one — and many more besides."

She went on and on spouting nonsense about the soul and spirit being some sort of a vessel for infinite energy. Gibberish about heavenly debts and not being able to go to the next level of the afterlife unless I transformed my debit column from red to black.

Honestly, I never believed in any of this nonsense.

“Well, Morgan,” said the tall woman leaning so close we were almost nose-to-nose, “this nonsense as you call it believes in you!”

Had she just read my mind?

“What number am I thinking of?” I said.

“Eight.”

Damn.

She launched back into her spirit and soul afterlife journey speech and I concentrated on her eye makeup to avoid any more mind reading. The blend of apricot and peach was exquisite.

I tuned back in when she said ‘team.’ Specifically, the words ‘your team.’

“Wait. Team? What team? Where team?”

“You will be working with the DSS. Our Demon Suppression Squad. They are part of the non-denominational Earthbound Order of the Acolytes who work for...” She gestured regally around the room. “Up here. Understand?”

“No,” I choked out. “So much ‘*no*’ to that question.”

She sniffed, “It was rhetorical. I don’t honestly care if you get it or not.” She looked at the clipboard in her hand. “Now I’ve lost my place. Where was I?” she barked at Polyester Shirt Guy.

He jumped to attention, started to salute, thought better of it, and put his arm down. “Madame was describing the Order and the DSS.”

“Yes, yes, the Order. Been around for thousands of years, blah, blah, blah, humans working for our side, blah, blah. Soldiers of Heaven and all that. The DSS is a kill team that should match your...” she frowned at me, “unique, shall we say? Yes. Unique abilities. Your job is to remove with malice and forethought demons that are causing...” she paused, “a ruckus.” And laughed her champagne bubble laugh. “What got you into trouble during your life, will now become a wonderful after-death asset for us.”

I stared at her, my mouth open. “Skills? Kill Team? Are you out of your perfectly coiffed mind?”

A pair of massive wings that matched the peacock jewels in her medallion snapped open knocking Polyester Shirt Guy right off his feet. Her eyes narrowed and her aura turned dark. A roll of thunder shook the floor so violently I had to grip the desk to keep from falling.

“Suck it up, buttercup,” she hissed. “You brought this on yourself.”

“Aren’t there other divisions?” I squeaked.

“Of course, there are other divisions.” She held up one hand and counted off on her long, shapely fingers. “The wildflower propagation division, artful seashell placement, bird song coaching, cherry blossom fluffing — though that’s seasonal — mermaid hair braiding.”

“Why can’t I fluff cherry blossoms or arrange seashells?” I demanded, smacking my fists on the table and rattling my manacles.

“Because nobody up here likes you once they’ve read your file.” She narrowed her eyes and leaned forward. “*I* don’t like you. Keep that in mind as you repay your debt.”

She pointed a blush pink nail at the glossy magazine. “That will explain what you need to know.” And moved the box closer to me on the table. “Your weapons are inside. Use them well. Use them wisely.”

She snapped her fingers and I just had time to say, “Fuck you!” when the floor, the chair, and the manacles disappeared and I plummeted into nothingness.

CHAPTER THREE: It Must Be Bitchcraft

It was a long fall through the vacuum of...well, wherever I was. After what felt like hours of darkness, the sun appeared and land and eventually a city came into view.

The velocity increased so suddenly I couldn't breathe. Wait, was I breathing? Wasn't I dead?

The city zoomed closer. I could see a massive grid of streets, then one block and one street hurtling up at me. Or rather, I was hurtling down to it.

Too fast! I was going too fast!

Buildings and trees blurred as my eyes teared. A rooftop rushed up and I closed my eyes, fearing a horrible splat.

My momentum screeched to a stop so abruptly that if I wasn't dead, I'd have wet myself.

I heard a shout of, "Incoming!" and I was on the ground with a bone-jarring *thump* staring into the face of a toothy green crocodile.

Screaming, because well, *crocodile*, I scooted away and began to pummel the reptile with my feet.

Smack, smack, smack.

It gave a screech almost as loud as mine and reared back. That is when I noticed the crocodile was wearing a suit.

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to observe more since my stomach, which had lagged a mile or so behind in free fall, decided to catch up with me at that exact moment.

"She's going to blow!" said a voice.

"Bucket!" shouted someone else.

I turned on my side, grabbed the bucket that was thrust at me, and was thoroughly ill, though the only thing that came out was a sticky clear *goop*.

"Crocodile," I wheezed when the heaving subsided.

"Alligator," said someone in a hurt voice. "You can tell the difference by the snout. Crocodiles have a V-shaped snout. Alligators have..."

"Oh shut up, Alistair," said the other voice. "Nobody cares!"

I pushed the bucket away. Two sets of legs in black trousers were standing in front of where I lay sprawled across the floor.

I looked up to see who was attached to the legs and squeaked again, scrambling away until I bumped into a wall.

The crocodile, correction, *alligator* was standing upright on long legs next to a large, strongly built man with romance-novel-worthy wavy hair and jawline and blue eyes. Both were wearing black suits, though the man didn't have a tie and his white shirt strained to contain his manly chest and shoulders. The alligator's suit was cut around a long scaly tail that swept back and forth.

"Am I still dead?" I gasped.

The handsome man laughed and the alligator looked mournful. I didn't know alligators could look mournful. Today was a day for learning many new things.

"Yeah," said the man. "You're still dead. We're all dead." He put out a hand and helped me to my feet.

I swayed unsteadily on shaky legs and nearly fell. The alligator pulled over a chair and I collapsed into it.

A cafe, I thought to myself looking around. I was in a cafe. Boho chic. Maybe a dozen artfully unmatched rustic tables and chairs. Twinkling white fairy lights strung along the walls. Oversized ferns flanking the counter. A blackboard decorated in chalk on an easel by the front door had 'Welcome to Djinn & Tonic' written in rainbow block letters across the top.

The wall next to me held a mirror in a gilt frame. Fully six feet tall, I could see myself reflected in it.

Whoa. I had better be dead. There was no other excuse for my appearance. I didn't even know my hair could *do* that.

An open bottle of cold water was pressed into my hand and I gulped greedily. As I drank, I looked at the face of the person who had handed it to me. And spit it out all over him, coughing and choking.

A dark man with glistening black hair and what looked like enough muscle to lift an ox had ram's horns on top of his head. And they were on fire. *Horns! On fire!*

The choking turned into gagging and it was some time before I could breathe again.

"Did you skip processing?" asked the alligator in a cultured British accent.

I nodded.

"Ruckus?" he said.

I nodded again.

"Ah, that explains it."

"Explains what?" I choked. "Nothing anyone has said makes any god damn sense. And why is that man's head on fucking fire!"

A peal of thunder shook the room making the glasses on the counter shake.

"Watch the swearing," said the alligator. "Infernal Revenue is a bit sensitive about that."

“You are fucking kidding me?”

Thunder rumbled ominously and the guy with finery horns quickly retreated behind the counter.

“That’s Zayn, he’s a Djinn. Fire element,” the alligator said pointing at the big fiery guy.

He said it as if twin fires coming out of your head weren’t at all out of the ordinary.

Zayn wiggled his fingers hello from across the room, wiping the water off his face with the front of his tee-shirt.

“What did you call him?” I asked thinking I must have misheard. My brain felt like it was stuffed with extra-large cotton balls.

“A Djinn. Westerners say genie.” He put his arms over his head and did a sort of belly dance shimmy. If you ever have a chance to see an alligator shimmy, don’t take it.

“Lamp?” I asked.

The Djinn in question frowned mightily practically shouting, “No lamp!”

I didn’t believe him. “Genies always have a lamp,” I insisted.

“Not in real life,” the Djinn in question growled.

That made me laugh so hard I started to choke.

“I’m Graves.” The good-looking man indicated himself. “This is Alistair,” he pointed at the alligator. “And you’re our new weapons guy.”

Alistair cleared his throat.

Graves glanced at me, “I mean weapons lady... um, weapons...person.”

I rolled my eyes. Why were people having trouble with my gender today?

“We saw a little of your chart. Glad to have you aboard,” said Alistair his long jaws stretching wide.

“Teeth,” I choked out. “Too many teeth.”

He hurriedly put his hands over his snout.

“Watch out!” the guy who’d introduced himself as Graves shouted.

The three men dove for cover and a hard object smacked me on the head.

When I woke up and stopped heaving — head injuries make you nauseous, Graves informed me — the alligator handed me a wooden box. It had to be the same one Shirley No.1 brought in the white room. They’d probably thrown it out of heaven to hit me on purpose.

I was still staring at the box and thinking evil thoughts when Graves yanked me hard.

Before I could protest, something landed with a resounding slap right where I had been sitting on the floor. It was the shiny fashion magazine.

I shook my fist at the sky.

“Show us the box, show us the box,” said Alistair eagerly.

Box. Right. I got up off the floor, taking my box and magazine to a table.

Alistair and Graves crowded around, peering eagerly at the box.

Zayn leaped nimbly over the counter to join us. He had eyes only for the magazine.

"Ooooh, it's the Fall Fashion issue! You've got the upgrade."

He made an 'Is it okay motion?' And when I nodded, he eagerly picked it up and began flipping through the pages.

With a quick glance at the ceiling in case anything else was hurtling my way, I pushed the latch back and swung open the lid.

Graves whistled.

"That should get the job done," nodded the alligator.

Inside the box was a black flashlight and another object. A shiny purse-sized blue phone charger. Cylinder shaped.

"May I see them?" asked Graves.

I handed over the phone charger and nudged the box forward. "Knock yourself out."

The two passed the objects around, *oohing* and *aahing* over the phone charger and flashlight like they were the coolest things ever.

The alligator eventually handed them back and I asked the question that was uppermost on my mind.

"Why are you an alligator?"

He cringed a little, hanging his head and not meeting my eyes.

Zayn, still looking at the magazine, stepped to the counter, grabbed a bottle of water and handed it over. He moved hurriedly back in case I decided to spit it all over him again I guess.

"Are you still upset?" Graves asked, quirking an eyebrow. "Because you seemed upset when you landed."

If looks could kill I'd have slain the big man who looked like a romance novel cover where he stood. "I've been handcuffed and dragged around and told I'm a bad person and kicked out of heaven by an angel. No one will explain anything. And now I'm sitting in a coffee shop talking to a long-legged alligator in a suit and a man with flames coming out of his head. Who you," I pointed an accusing finger at the alligator, "said is a *genie*! How could I not be upset?"

"But," Graves persisted, "you're not upset about actually being dead?"

That brought me up short and I had to have a quick think. He was right. I felt I should be frantic over that. Hysterical in fact.

But I wasn't.

"Why am I not upset?" I eyed them suspiciously. "There's a reason, isn't there?"

They all shuffled their feet and looked around not meeting my eyes. The gator subtly pushed Graves forward. He cut his eyes to the other man, um, reptile, then back to me.

"You're in the Fog. The Bureau gives it to you before you wake up. It blurs your past including how you died, where you lived, all of that. Can't have you running back to say hello to the family." He gave me a weak smile. "It also numbs the brain temporarily from the shock of what's happened."

"Temporarily? Will my past come back to me later?"

He took a deep breath before exhaling, "No, probably not."

"No?"

"Most of it is gone. You'll get a lot of random bits and pieces of memory. Much of your education is still intact, of course. Your personality as well."

"Will I care about being dead?"

Graves looked to Alistair.

"Yes," answered the alligator. "You will care about that."

"You care about it, don't you," I said looking at Graves and surprising myself. I don't know where that came from.

Graves didn't answer.

"I don't," said Alistair cheerfully. "I'm quite well adjusted to the fact."

Zayn snorted, saying "Yeah, right," under his breath.

"I am," insisted the alligator.

I was staring at his mouth. Snout. I made a motion around my own mouth. "How can you talk? You don't have lips."

He backed up a step. Was he blushing? There was a pink tinge under his green cheeks. He was saved from answering by the urgent beeping of some electronic device.

Alistair waggled one wrist exposing a large watch under his jacket sleeve. His hands were green and scaly but were, nevertheless, hands and not paws or whatever alligators possessed.

He pressed a button and the beeping stopped. "If we're going to catch the next train to Arcadia, we have to go now."

Graves took the phone charger and flashlight out of the box and handed them over. "Have you read your magazine?"

Zayn had it spread open on the counter and was slowly turning the pages.

"What is with the Fall Issue obsession?" I whined, waving my gadgets, one in each hand.

Both Graves and Alistair ducked as if they could go off.

Zayn opened the magazine fully, showing it to me. "It's both a beautifully edited mix of fashion and beauty tips for men and women, plus self-help articles on adjusting to the afterlife. Also," he flipped

to the back of the magazine, “information specific to your division, the DSS in this case, and your weapons.”

I looked at what seemed to be illustrations of my flashlight and phone charger and a long list of specs. I tried to reach for the magazine. Graves was faster, tugging it away.

“No time. You can play catch-up later.”

“I don’t want to play catch-up,” I muttered. “You’re all crazy.”

Graves kept his hold on my wrist and pulled me to the door. “Then you’re crazy too. We can all be crazy together.”

“We’re on a case,” said Alistair, joining us.

I said “What?” because I had no idea what being on a case meant to me.

“A case. You’re in the Demon Suppression Squad now, remember?” He didn’t wait for an answer yes or no. “We’re tracking a couple of nasties. Hope to put them down today. You’re our weapons guy. I mean, person. Hook your flashlight and charger on your belt.”

My Keita Yamaguchi flared skirt did not seem like suitable attire for putting down anything nastier than a Dirty Martini.

Also, I did not have a belt.

I was about to say so when I found myself sandwiched between the alligator and Graves and moving purposefully to the door.

One foot over the threshold and my whole body itched and burned. The skirt and tee-shirt ensemble blurred and were replaced with black yoga pants, a black high-low tee and, I looked at the shoulder, a North Face full-zip fleece in steel blue and black. Running shoes completed my new ensemble and... a nylon clip-belt.

I pulled to a stop on the sidewalk and Graves plowed into me. Except it wasn’t Graves. It was a giant dog, black with flecks of gray through its long pelt.

“Fuck me!” I screeched.

A flash of lightning struck the sidewalk and thunder rumbled.

“*Kiyaaa!*” yelled Alistair jumping in surprise.

I answered with another “Fuck me!”

Lightning hit a few feet away.

“Stop swearing!” he pleaded, his voice breaking.

“Totally justified,” I yelled back. “Why are you no longer an alligator?”

Because he wasn’t. Instead of a pointy snout and rows of sharp teeth, Alistair was now a good-looking man in his thirties with blond hair and an aristocratic face: high cheekbones, aquiline nose, dimpled chin, smooth lips — the works.

“And why is there suddenly a dog?” I pointed strenuously at the black dog.

“He’s a wolf, not a dog. Formerly a *Loup-Garou.* A werewolf who terrorized the French countryside several centuries ago. Because of his actions, he’s cursed even in the afterlife.”

Wolf my ass. He was the size of a bear if that bear had gone on a low-carb diet and gotten fabulous fur extensions. Because, damn, Graves was glossy!

“Me,” he pointed at himself. “I’m a Püca, a shapeshifter who made poor life choices. The threshold is charmed. We change when we go through,” explained Alistair in a rush. “You, too.”

Something sped through the air to fall at my feet. I jumped.

“Don't swear,” cried Alistair.

“You forgot his harness!” called Zayn from the cafe before shutting the door with a bang.

Alistair quickly fit an oversized harness around the wolf. It had ‘Service Dog’ written in big yellow letters and a plastic pouch for some sort of official-looking license. The principle service Graves looked capable of rendering was tearing people in half.

Alistair quickly took the flashlight and phone charger out of my hands, clipping them onto individual hooks on the nylon belt.

“We have to hurry.”

Alistair held the wolf’s leash loosely as they jogged across the parking lot of a weather-worn two-story strip mall. Djinn and Tonic was in one of the corner units. Man and wolf walked quickly to the end of the street and waited for the light to change. I followed at a bemused slower pace.

The day was warm and sunny. Not a cloud in the royal blue sky. We were in America, that was obvious from the cars and storefront signs lining a four-lane boulevard stretching out in front of the strip mall.

Bare, stony mountains dominated the horizon. They were quite close. The San Gabriel’s maybe? The scenery certainly looked like LA: tall skinny palms along the boulevard and what had to be Jacaranda trees crowned in purple blooms. I checked the license plates of the cars as we walked through the crosswalk. Yep. California.

“What city is this?” I shouted.

“Pasadena!”

Pasadena. Did I remember anything about Pasadena? *Hmmmm.* Colorado Boulevard. The street sign at the corner said ‘Colorado’ so that didn’t count.

“Rose Bowl Parade!” I shouted triumphantly.

Both Graves and Alistair looked over their shoulder to stare at me.

“I remembered something...” I trailed off.

The street was busy with cars and bicycles and a lot of people. Every sort of man, every sort of woman, much like those who I had seen sitting in the fake Corbusier chairs a short time before. Far too short a time.

Leaning over, my hand to my chest, I gasped. Pain flowered across my breast, into my arms. My vision blurred and I swayed. Everything shifted — street, buildings, sidewalk — and for a split second I saw my shirt red with blood and a marble floor rushing up at me. I thrust out my hands to save myself and just as quickly, the world shifted back to cracked concrete and the smell of exhaust.

"Come on!" urged Alistair waving me forward. "You're lagging."

Stumbling, I followed, trying to keep my feet. If this was part of Graves' Fog, I could do without it.

It took a block before my breathing — yes, I was breathing even though I was in the past tense — leveled off and the buzzing in my ears faded. We hurried past a couple of fast-food places, a gas station, a convenience store, a tattoo parlor, and under a freeway overpass. By the time we climbed a flight of stairs to the entrance of a light rail station, the whole episode felt unreal. Physically and mentally filed under 'unimportant details.'

The station was busy with people hurrying in and out. Most had backpacks and looked to be in their late teens or twenties judging by the number of Star Wars tee-shirts and piercings.

A handful of homeless people were camped out on either side of the entrance surrounded by piles of plastic bags and holding out cups for change. The station smelled like urine and sweat.

I grabbed Alistair's coat tail, pulling him to a stop.

"I don't do public transportation."

Alistair looked at me. His eyes blinked rapidly. He started to say something, then stopped.

"I beg your pardon?" he managed finally.

"Public transport and me." I made a big 'X' with my arms. "Not compatible. I don't remember much but I am fairly certain about this. It is full of the unwashed and we will get stabbed. I don't care if I am dead. I do not wish to be stabbed. Don't you have a car?"

The wolf growled and laid his ears back.

"Are you supposed to be intimidating?" I said to him. "Because all I have to do is take that service vest off and they will haul your doggy ass to the pound."

Thunder shook the roof of the station and Alistair cringed. "Please. Language. I am sorry but this is how we roll. Penance and all. It's not supposed to be easy. Here is your transit pass. Do not lose it."

He handed over a laminated plastic card on a lanyard. Grabbing my wrist, he hauled me into the station just as the train pulled up to the platform. I hesitated as the doors opened but the wolf jumped up on his hind legs and knocked me through.

I took a swipe at him but Graves was too fast.

It didn't smell as bad as I feared. But maybe that was because everyone was now crowded at one end of the car as far as possible from Graves. Well, except for one extraordinarily fat man in a purple running suit who was either asleep or dead. Probably dead.

We rocked and rattled along with what Alistair told me was the 210 Freeway flanking us. Except for the San Gabriel's it was an astoundingly ugly ride. Big box stores. Suburban sprawl. Gas stand signs. Bumper-to-bumper trucks and cars in the southbound lanes.

Graves woofed out a few words.

"Sorry, I do not speak dog."

"Wolf," corrected Alistair. "He's right though, it's the Fog. You're still under its influence. Everything feels a bit unreal. Reality will hit eventually."

I gave him a level look, "There is absolutely, positively, nothing real about any of this."

CHAPTER FOUR: Abra Cadaver

The light rail let us off about a mile from Santa Anita Thoroughbred Racetrack.

Races? Cool. That could be fun.

Then Alistair informed me we were going to the track, not the actual races.

My shoulders sagged.

"Been a lot of dead horses here in the past year. Too many. Suspicions aroused and all that. We've been looking into it. Last week Graves sniffed out a body buried under one of the automatic hot walkers."

Graves woofed.

"Exactly. It smelled 'wrong' he said. Some nasty alchemy. Races start up again tomorrow. We believe something will make a move tonight."

"Don't you mean someone?"

Alistair gave me a wary look and shook his head.

Thing?

Great.

Wonderful.

On race days there was a free shuttle. Today, as my luck would have it, was not a race day. We would have to walk. And walk and walk and walk, the San Gabriel's at our backs.

Being dead seemed to involve much more physical exercise than you would think.

Shadows were long in the afternoon sun. That was when I noticed Graves shadow did not walk on four legs but two.

It was the shadow of a man. Graves, presumably.

What about Alistair?

Stepping a little closer, I checked him out.

Well, crap. The faint outline of a thick, ridged tail swung behind his long legs.

Could anyone see them or only the dead-like-me crowd? I opened my mouth to ask and then just as quickly shut it. There were enough mysteries in my afterlife now.

After what felt like much farther than one measly mile, we arrived behind the grandstands. This was a service entrance for horses and supplies. A wide swing gate was open and a uniformed security guard on duty.

"IRS," said Alistair flashing a shiny badge and picture I.D. at him.

The guard took a step back. Nobody likes a surprise visit from the IRS.

“Irregularities in the accounting department,” Alistair explained. “We have an appointment. Court order.” He flipped open a white paper with a lot of words in a small font crowded together and a fancy seal.

“What’s the dog for?” said the guy, giving Graves an eyeful.

“Cadaver dog,” snapped Alistair smartly and made to walk past.

The guard moved slightly to block his way. “Why would the IRS need a cadaver dog.”

Alistair lowered his voice ominously, “There are always bodies,” and shoved by him.

Once off the leash, Graves took the lead, pausing every now and then to sniff the air. No one challenged us. I expected a lot more hustle and bustle if the races were starting tomorrow. Closer to the Grandstand, about a hundred yards away, were a couple of pick-ups with horse trailers attached parked under skinny palms and some acacias. A group of men and women were talking. A handful of horses either stood, stamping the ground and swishing their tails, or being walked or ridden. No one so much as looked our way.

We followed Graves past a barn stuffed with bales of hay and around clusters of low wooden stable buildings painted a greenish-blue. Honestly, they looked a bit run down. The grounds were churned up with dirt and worse and I picked my way carefully through the muck.

“Do you really have a court order?” I asked Alistair as I jumped around a pile of horse poop.

“Yes, for something that happened in 1974. I found it in the city archives. Took a photocopy and embellished with a bit of calligraphy We should be fine.”

Graves trotted back to woof some low-voiced canine comments.

Alistair rolled his eyes. “I know that’s the sort of the thing that got me in trouble with the Infernal Revenue. But it comes in handy and it’s for a good cause. I doubt they count that against me.”

Thunder rumbled far above us.

“Hopefully...”

Graves loped over to one group of stable buildings, nose to the ground. He soon voiced what I assumed was an ‘Over here!’ bark since Alistair jogged to join him. In this part of the complex, there were two rows of stalls facing each other. Each stall had a swing door divided into two parts so an upper grill could be opened. Horses liked to hang their heads out of stall doors I seemed to remember. Some stalls had the upper half of the door open, others were closed. From the smell, I assumed many had horses inside.

Graves jumped easily over one of the stall doors. There was a startled whinny then all was quiet.

Alistair and I approached and leaned over the door frame to look inside. The horse, a big chestnut, was backed into the corner, nostrils flared and blowing air noisily through them. He stayed where he was even as Alistair swung open the door and walked through.

“Graves has put the wolf whammy on him,” explained Alistair. “He’ll stay there.”

“Good,” I said, and I meant it. Horses are enormous. Rummaging around in what little sense of self I seemed to have, I felt I did not like horses. Or animals. Maybe barely even people.

Graves paced back and forth in the smelly stall with his nose to the ground. Finally, he pounced on one spot and began to dig furiously. Since his paws were enormous, he made a lot of headway in a short time.

I stood in the stall doorway curious but not truly caring. The question of, ‘What the hell am I doing at Santa Anita Racetrack with these weirdos’ seemed oddly unimportant. In fact, nothing seemed very important.

It was with an odd complacency I watched as Graves uncovered a body in an advanced state of decomposition. The face looked as if it had melted.

Alistair left the stall, returning with a shovel.

Together they finished uncovering the body.

The horse had calmed considerably and did not seem terribly upset about the grisly discovery either. Rather like myself. Maybe Graves Wolf Whammy worked like the Fog.

The smell was another matter entirely.

I pulled my tee-shirt collar up over my nose, zipped up my jacket, and pulled that up as well.

“It’s just as Inverness thought,” Alistair said to Graves as they stared at the horrible oozing mess. “The corpse has been infected.”

“Why?” I asked, moving several steps away.

Graves barked out a long canine answer which was no help at all.

Alistair nodded, doing an “Uh-huh, uh-huh,” thing.

Tapping on the stall door, I said, “Translation, please.”

“Oh, sorry, right. Graves says he saw this in Europe in the last century. A demon infects the body with a virus then buries it under the dirt in a horse’s stall. As the body decomposes, the virus leeches up through the dirt into the horses’ hooves and infects them.”

“And?”

Graves and Alistair exchanged troubled looks.

“The virus breeds inside the animal. A certain type of demon feeds on the infected blood. It’s the only way they can eat. Feeding weakens the horse. The thing is, any horse will do.” He indicated the stables. “These horses are hideously expensive. Why would the demon choose such a public venue?”

Since I had no clue and was gagging on the smell, I decided to put more distance between myself and the corpse.

The big Chestnut decided I had the right idea. It trotted over to stand next to me.

Out in the open a faint rocking rhythm drifting over the stable grounds.

Bam, bam, BAM. Bam, bam, BAM! Boomed the base.

"Do you hear that?" I asked the horse.

He nickered and swiveled his head.

Bam, bam, BAM. Bam, bam, BAM!

Graves peeped out of the door, ears sweeping forward.

Bam, bam, BAM. Bam, bam, BAM!

Alistair poked his head out.

Bam, bam, BAM. Bam, bam, BAM!

I thought I vaguely recognized the song. "What is that? AC/DC?"

"Are you joking?" Alistair stepped out of the paddock, his upper lip curling in scorn. "AC/DC? Really? Don't you recognize perfection when you hear it? That's Queen! Freddie amazing Mercury! *We will Rock You.* One of the greatest rock anthems of all time!"

"Queen. Okay. Geez, take it easy. Brain fog here. Remember? I don't even know my last name."

He did not look appeased. "Some things you just don't forget." He appeared ready to launch into a lecture on the wonders of Freddie and the band. Fortunately, Graves took Alistair's hand in his mouth and tugged him in the direction of the music.

Alistair glared over his shoulder as they walked away and waggled a finger. "We shall continue this later," he said.

"No, we won't," I replied.

The two of them walked to the far end of the yard. Slowly, the racehorse and I shambled behind.

We walked to a different set of stables. No people that I could see. Here there were two rows of stalls on either side of a wide dirt passage open to the elements.

Most of the stalls had the upper half open and a few horses peeked out. The big Chestnut went to say hello.

Queen was rocking out of the third stall on the left. Alistair stood on one side of the door, I squatted low and moved to the other side. We looked over. Graves didn't bother hiding, he popped up placing his front paws on the door.

A pair of men were in the stall. Grooms, I presumed. Just regular-looking guys in jeans and plaid shirts. And a horse. Brown, with a black mane and tail.

The horse was covered in sweat and standing rigidly. Tremors shook its shoulders and flanks. Its big eyes were rolled back until the whites showed. He, it was a he, I could see, was breathing fast and hard, his jaws wide, nostrils flared.

The animal was terrified. So frightened even I felt a wave of sympathy for the beast. Which is saying a lot.

One of the men had his mouth pressed to the horse's body, right where the neck met the chest or whatever part of the horse that was called. He looked like he was sucking on something.

A boom box sat nestled inside a hay net. The other guy was lip-synching and wiggling his hips to the Queen song while digging in the center of the stall. He'd half uncovered another decomposing body.

Graves jumped up and over the door, snarling a challenge. Alistair, not the leaping kind of guy, drew back the latch and walked through, dragging me with him.

The guy sucking on the horse pulled himself away with a nasty slurping sound that revealed a white stumpy tentacle protruding from his mouth.

I tried to turn right around.

"Steady on," whispered Alistair, holding tight.

The men changed. And not in a good way. Their human skin bubbled, swelling like giant blisters. Their clothes melted and their bodies contorted all within the span of a few seconds. They tripled in mass and size and the number of visible appendages, claws, and teeth.

"What's going on?" I squeaked. "What's happening?"

"*Glamour*. They were hiding in a *glamour*. Bending reality to fool humans into seeing… well, whatever they want."

One looked like a cross between a Grizzly and an octopus, complete with waving tentacles. The other was a grotesque mixture of a tiger and a squid. Also with tentacles.

I did not see anything remotely glamourous in this change. Suddenly I had to go to the bathroom. Badly.

Octo-Bear and Squid-a-Puss made a trumpeting sound like a philharmonic horn section and charged.

Graves launched himself at Squid-A-Puss and Octo-Bear lunged at me. At which point I slammed the stall door in his squishy octopus' face. This allowed Alistair time to tackle him from behind and for me to remove myself to the other side of the dirt track as fast as my legs could take me.

There was a smash and splinter of wood and Graves came tumbling out of the stall door on Squid-A-Puss' back. He was holding on by his claws and ripping big, bloody chunks out of it with his teeth.

Alistair had some sort of short truncheon in one hand and was beating Octo-Bear on its squishy head to little effect.

The beast reached back with two sickly purple tentacles, wrapping them around Alistair's legs and jerking him up. It began flinging him around and around like a cowboy with a lasso.

"Do..." Alistair screamed as he flew by with a *whoosh*.

"...some;" he said swishing overhead on the next pass.

"...thing!"

"Me?" I said, pointing at myself.

Graves yelped in pain and flew across the passage to land sprawled at my feet.

Octo-Bear trumpeted a challenge, tentacles slapping the ground and making it shake.

The brown horse, released from the spell or whatever had held him, took the opportunity to come rampaging out. He reared up at the sight of Octo-Bear landing hard on the monster's back with his front hooves.

Smack, *smack*, and one more *smack* for good measure.

That had to hurt.

Octo-Bear slumped to the ground letting go of Alistair in mid-spin. He flew through the air, tumbling into one of the open stalls.

The dark brown horse, now neighing maniacally, began galloping up and down the passage. The Chestnut, wanting to get in on the fun, joined him.

Weren't there security people? Or cameras or something? My mouth had gone dry and my hands were shaking. If this was the fight or flight response, flight was winning.

I stepped out into the passage intending to run as fast as my wobbly legs could carry me when the two horses came galloping by. I threw myself next to one of the stall doors to avoid being trampled.

Something clamped hold of my hoodie and I screeched, spinning around and punching. Well, more like flailing than punching, but I did connect with something furry.

Graves yelped.

Oops.

He gave me *such* a look.

"What?" I said to him defiantly

He laid his ears back and bared his teeth.

A flash of white and I saw Squid-a-Puss launch itself in the air from the stall door, tentacles reaching.

My stomach slid to my ankles and a wave of cold fear gripped me as tightly as Graves' teeth.

I watched it falling toward us as if in slow motion. Big squiddy eyes wide and goopy pale white tentacles reaching. The panicked thoroughbred and his new pal smashed into it, knocking the demon over.

The horses proceeded to tap dance on its body with their steel-shod hooves for several seconds before running on.

Good horsey! That beast could have killed me.

While it was on its back, Graves let go of me and lunged for its throat.

'Wait a second," I thought.

Killed me.

Death.

What was it about death I should think about?

Or not supposed to think about?

I was dead. That was it.

OH MY GOD. I WAS DEAD.

Really dead. Really, really dead. I felt it with the same certainty as when I woke up in the white corridor in the fake Corbusier chair.

It didn't seem to matter then.

It freaking mattered now.

A shadow slid from me like a sheet of water exposing my shivering, naked body. My shoulders trembled and I thought I understood how the horse must have felt, transfixed with terror.

Dead and gone.

Gone for good.

"Morgan!" came a strangled cry. "*Morgan*!"

I looked up.

Octo-Bear had recovered and now had every tentacle wrapped around Alistair. Both Alistair's legs were up and pressed into the thing's face trying to keep the sucker-like mouth ringed with teeth away.

"Your flashlight," he yelled in a strangled voice. "Draw your flashlight for heaven's sake!"

Flashlight? Was I supposed to shine a bit of light on him being torn to pieces by a demon?

Besides, we are already dead. How much worse could it get?

I sniffled wetly and swiped my teary eyes with the back of my hand.

"I'm dead," I wailed.

Alistair's eyes got very wide as he and Octo-Bear tumbled by. "The Fog is lifting now? Now? *Augh*. Oh, that hurts!" He stabbed at the demon's eyes with his truncheon but the beast walloped him on the head with one arm.

"Graves!" he screeched. "She's having an existential crisis!"

There was a loud *bang, bang, banging* coming from nearby but I didn't care.

Graves yelped as Squid-A-Puss pulled him off with two sets of arms and flung him into the stable wall.

Several horses burst out of their stalls. Ah, that explained the banging. They had kicked open the stall doors.

The horses joined their stablemates running back and forth from one end of the stable yard to the other. The horses didn't seem particularly frightened, more like they were having a good time.

Graves pulled himself out of the dirt, shaking off the impact. He briefly put one big paw on my leg and I swear I heard him say "Snap out of it!"

Squid-A-Puss slapped three sticky tentacles around his middle and jerked him away.

Should I snap out of it?

"Awk!" Alistair yelled as Octo-Bear pulled him out of the stall and began flinging him back and forth on the ground with great thumps as the horses galloped around them like a gymkhana event.

"Flashlight. Please, Morgan. Help!"

"I'm dead!" I tried to put the wretched emptiness filling me into those two words.

"Not dead!" He screeched back. "Better. Beyond life!"

Graves went sailing over my head.

Squid-A-Puss spun around and locked its enormous watery eyes on me. It crouched, readying to spring.

I'd like to say it was Alistair's words that pushed me to action but honestly, the threat of being torn apart by a half tiger, half squid monster was what did it. Apparently, even the dead have survival instincts.

Clumsily, I pulled the heavy flashlight off its hook and aimed it at the monster. I thumbed the 'on' button just as it jumped.

A bright flash of light exploded. The kickback knocked me backward into the stable wall and I slid down in the dirt with my legs splayed. For a moment, all I could see were bright slashes of light. My nose, however, was unaffected and I gagged on the choking smell of burning tires and charcoal.

Blinking my sight into focus, I flinched at the touch of white ash drifting lazily to the ground. The air was filled with it.

Squid-a-Puss was gone.

"Ack!" screeched Alistair, rolling by me and out the stable doors still tangled up in the multi-legged octopus bear.

The flashlight was a weapon in disguise. How clever.

I got up and dusted my pants off. 'Good job, Morgan,' I thought, giving myself a mental pat on the back. Time to be going.

Graves was nearby. He pulled himself up slowly looking like he'd taken one hit too many. Nevertheless, he limped unsteadily after Alistair and Octo-Bear.

I trotted in the opposite direction figuring I'd done my bit and zapped the demon.

Before I'd gotten a few stalls down, Graves came back to block my path, whining and dancing frantically from paw to paw.

"Horses!" I shouted in warning.

We flattened ourselves against the stable wall as the thoroughbreds galloped by kicking up their heels and tossing their tails.

He pawed at my yoga pants and I tried to push him away. "You two have this under control, right? I shall be going."

Graves chose to disagree with those plans. He grabbed a mouthful of my jacket and jerked. I jerked back. He jerked harder. Pulling me off my feet, he dragged me kicking and shouting through the dirt behind him.

He was an extremely strong wolf.

We emerged into the open beyond the stable buildings. Alistair and Octo-Bear had not gone far. They were tumbling around and around in the exercise yard, bouncing from one automatic walker to the other.

Graves dragged me closer. I kicked at him, swearing at the top of my voice. Thunder rumbled overhead and there was a flash of lightning high in the night sky.

I tried to twist out of his grip but he tightened it just enough that his teeth broke the skin. I yelped in pain and swore louder.

Lightning crackled and thunder erupted in a tympani of drum work that had my head pounding.

Graves let go of my arm and pawed fiercely at the flashlight I'd snapped back on my belt.

"All right, all right!" I shouted, kicking at him with both feet as I unclipped the light. "I'll zap!"

Easy to say, difficult, to achieve. Alistair and the Octo-Bear were tangled in a mess of tentacles, arms, and legs. If I used the flashlight, there was every chance I'd zap them both. One blast poofed Squid-A-Puss into ash. What would happen if I hit Alistair?

Not that I cared, I reminded myself. Right? I didn't even know him.

Graves nipped me on the thigh to hurry up.

I spun on him. "Cut it out, you motherfucker!"

Thunder shook the ground and knocked me over.

Hmm.

"Motherfucker," I said again experimentally.

A streak of lightning smashed into the ground sending dirt and horse poop flying.

“Oh, oh, oh,” I thought to myself. I may be dead but I am a clever girl.

“God damn fucking mutt dog!” I shouted looking not at Graves but up at the sky.

A flash crackled above us followed immediately by a deafening roll of thunder.

Oh, yes, I got this.

Shaking one fist, I snarled, “Shit, shit, shit! Jeezus, Joseph, and Mary damn you all to hell.”

That did it.

Righteous fury rained down from the heavens.

The first strike split the ground beside me.

The second tossed Graves into the air and almost out of sight.

And the third hit the demon holding Alistair square in the butt.

With a scream that shattered all the windows in the storage shed just to our left and set off a symphony of car alarms across some distant parking lot, it let go of Alistair.

“Get out of the god damn way Gator Guy or I will kick your mother fucking butt to hell and back!” I screeched.

Alistair squeaked in reply, scrambling off on all fours in a good imitation of a crab.

The demon charged.

I aimed the flashlight and thumbed the button just as a streak of lightning zig- zagged out of the sky straight at me.

CHAPTER FIVE: Tea and Sympathy

"Awk," I groaned, opening my eyes. "Will whoever is hitting me in the head with a baseball bat please stop?"

I was on the hard ground, lying face up. Overhead, puffy banks of clouds blushed pink in the nascent glow of a brilliant SoCal sunset. The effect looked like the background of a painting. Pastel clouds, pale translucent blue sky, and nauseated woman on the ground. I turned on my side and gagged into a bout of the dry heaves.

Since I had thrown up all the goo in my previous two barf fests there was nothing left. A win and loss at the same time.

In addition to physical exercise, there seems to be a lot of throwing up after you are dead.

Right. Dead.

My bottom lip trembled.

I didn't want to be dead. A nameless nobody with no memory.

Alistair was sitting near me. Graves just behind him. The big black wolf was covered in soot, dirt, and horse poop. His fur was singed and there were two deep tears on his shoulder and hip. Alistair looked even worse.

"Can you get to your feet?"

"I can't even feel my feet," I moaned.

"Sure you can. Just a bit of lightning. Think of it as stimulating," Alistair's voice was determinedly cheerful. I tried to punch him, but he ducked.

"That's the spirit. Graves said you'd be absolute rubbish! But you weren't. See, Graves," he ruffled the wolf's fur, "that will put some positive numbers in the ledger."

I glared at Graves. He narrowed his dark eyes right back.

One of the thoroughbreds walked by, stopping to sniff the wolfs' head before moving on. Two others were pulling mouthfuls of hay from bales in the barn. Another was rolling in the dirt having a dust bath. The stable yard seemed awfully quiet considering the recent combination of demonic and atmospheric mayhem and I said so.

"Demons had dampers buried around the back stables." He paused looking toward the stables and gates. "When demons want some privacy, they activate them. Humans are temporarily deaf, dumb, and blind to what's going on right in front of their faces. Now that the demons are dead, the dampers will quickly bleed away. Security will be here soon enough. We should go."

He slipped his hands under my armpits and lifted. "You'll feel better once you start moving."

“I’m dead,” I whined. “How do you feel better from dead?”

“Not dead, beyond life.” He said cheerfully. “It’s not so bad once you get used to it.”

I sniffled again, weaving unsteadily. The baseball bat was still hammering away and my feet were quickly going from numb to painful pins and needles.

I leaned over and whacked Graves on his furry head, much to his surprise. “That’s for biting me, mutt. Twice.”

Graves curled his lip over his fangs.

Putting a hand on my flashlight I said, “Bring it!”

Getting slowly to his feet, he turned and limped away.

There. I felt a little better. Nothing like threatening others to raise your spirits.

The three of us walked back the way we had come kicking up dust as we dragged our feet and paws. Alistair had to keep shooing the Chestnut away since it had decided we were all friends now and wanted to follow.

Alistair kept one steadying hand on my elbow as we walked.

“Bad time for the Fog to lift, I know.”

Graves woofed.

“Yes, you’re right. When is there a good time? That overwhelming sadness and sense of loss, well...” he paused with a deep sigh.

I did not like the sound of that. “*Well* what?” I demanded. “*Well*...it gets better? *Well*... we’ve all been there, just give yourself a couple of days. Define *well.”*

He raised his eyebrows, “Um, no it doesn’t get better and you will always feel that terrible sense of loss.”

Graves bit him on the ankle.

“Ow!” Yelped Alistair shoving the wolf away. “What? She asked.”

I felt like biting him as well. Biting something.

Alistair called in some sort of coded response to the police, telling them where the bodies were.

Graves woofed.

“Yes, I know. I don’t think this is the end of it.”

Sighing I asked, “Why? Just how many Squid-a-Puss and Octo-Bears are there in greater LA?”

“Oh, what clever names,” he clapped his hands. “Octo-Bear. I like that. Well done.”

Graves woofed and then woofed some more as we walked. Our new friend, the big chestnut had rejoined us and was happily clip-clopping behind.

Alistair translated saying these sorts of demons feed on the contaminated blood of the infected horse. The infection weakens the animal’s heart and lungs. Eventually, they collapse and are put down.

“Graves thinks they move from racecourse to racecourse. Round and round. Horses die on racecourses all the time.”

Graves barked.

“Yes, generally not quite this many. Our partner, Inverness, felt there was a deeper game afoot. Money from betting or perhaps insurance fraud at the root. That would explain the demons choosing racehorses instead of a pony farm.”

“And the murders,” I felt obliged to point out. “They murder people and bury them in the stable.”

“I doubt anyone finds out about those. The body dissolves into the ground at a rapid rate. The only reason we found it was because of Graves’ nose.”

The wolf wagged his tail.

“Don’t people notice they’re missing? The victims.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. People disappear at an alarming rate in this country. Around 600,000 go missing in the United States every year.”

My heart lurched. “That’s not possible.”

“I assure you it is. Will you go away!” Alistair flapped his arms at the Chestnut. The horse snorted and tried to nuzzle his hair.

“But surely some of them are found?” I said, putting a hand on his sleeve. There was a note of pleading in my voice. I didn’t care.

“What part of missing is unclear?” said Alistair trying to physically shove the horse away as it danced playfully around him. “If they were found, the statistic would reflect that. Most of them are probably dead. Murdered. It is quite an epidemic. Look it up. Go away, beast!”

My breath caught in my throat.

Dead.

Like me.

I gasped and swallowed convulsively.

The Chestnut came and nibbled my head with his wide, soft mouth. I reached up and he stood still as I hugged his neck.

Was my body found? Did people notice I was gone? Or was I one of those random 600,000 missing persons? Lost forever.

Alistair and Graves walked ahead. I wiped my eyes and nose on my sleeve, patted the horse, and did the same.

By the time we arrived at the gate, the guard was no longer there and sirens wailed in the distance — a lot of sirens.

The horse wanted to come with us and we had to crawl under the bar to keep him from pushing through. He pawed the ground with his hooves and whinnied until we were out of sight.

Alistair took my arm like some Victorian gentleman. I was too depressed to shove him away.

“Come on. I know just the thing for Fog-lifting blues. Let’s get some Bubble Tea. There’s a place on our way back to the station.”

“Tea?” I sneered. “After a day like today? Jeezus, Joseph...”

He clapped a hand over my mouth as a massive cloud swooped over our heads.

I held up my hand, waving that he’d made his point. He let go.

“What I need,” I continued, “is to drink like a Russian Bureaucrat. Vodka. Neat. Many shots in quick succession.”

“First Bubble Tea. Just come on. You’ll understand soon.”

There was indeed a tapioca drink place on the way back to the station. A little urban oasis all black and woody with large plastic signs of oversized milky drinks dripping with condensation and Chinese names.

We brushed as much dirt and muck off ourselves as we could until we were marginally presentable. Emphasis on *marginally*.

Alistair ordered a large pineapple and coconut for Graves and a mango-orange mix for himself. Maybe it was the Fog, maybe it was a concussion, but I couldn’t choose and I started to cry. This upset the skinny, tattoo-covered Bubble Tea girl with the green streak in her hair behind the counter.

“She’s had a rough day,” Alistair explained. “Let’s get her a strawberry yogurt tea. Strawberry is always a cheerful fruit.”

The girl smiled and patted my shoulder, “Very cheerful.”

Graves took my hand in his mouth and pulled me outside. A couple of tables under the shade of a silky acacia filled up the tiny terrace. Twilight lingered and the sky still blushed pink and orange. Sparrows hopped here and there under the tables. What they thought they’d find at a tapioca place I wasn’t sure. One tapioca ball alone would choke them.

Choke.

Did I choke?

I swiped at my eyes with my sleeve and sniffled. “Do you know how you died?”

Graves turned his big brown eyes on me. He was so large, his head was level with mine as we sat.

His ears flicked forward, and he nodded.

“Will I?”

He cocked his head to one side and mumbled something in wolf. I wasn’t sure what his answer was. Maybe that was for the better.

Alistair brought out three oversized drinks in orange, pink, and milky white. The dark tapioca balls filled the cups halfway up.

"Those have to be a thousand calories each," I declared. "That's like an entire day's worth!"

Graves gave me an incredulous look. Wolves have surprisingly expressive features. His look seemed to say, "That's what you're worried about?"

I sniffled and took a napkin off the tray to wipe my nose. "You have a point."

Alistair poured Graves banana-coconut into a stainless-steel bowl provided by the counter girl.

"You'll feel better after a drink, believe me," Alistair urged, handing me the creamy pink confection.

I took a sip, savoring the tart sweetness of the strawberries and chewing on a couple of tapioca balls.

Graves lapped his with enthusiasm. As I watched, the ragged cuts on his hip and leg began to disappear. Erased. Inch by inch. Halfway through, he paused to smooth the fur over what had been bloody wounds.

Nudging him with my foot, I waggled my hands over his hip. Ignoring me, he returned to enthusiastically finish his bubble tea.

His skin rippled in tiny waves as he drank, the fur turning smooth and glossy. Muck, blood, squid, and octopus goo flaked off onto the wooden deck. With a last lick and a contented sigh, Graves settled on the terrace, resting his chin on his paws.

Cutting my eyes to Alistair I blew out a deep breath. What the heck? The cuts and scrapes on his face were now gone as well. His skin completely smooth.

Grabbing a handful of his coat and making him choke on a mouthful of tapioca, I yanked him close. "Okay, spill Gator Guy. What's with the magic bubble drinks?"

Once he finished choking, he said, "Elixir. Healing," he paused for another bout of coughing. "Awk, will you let go! Why are you so violent?

Loosening my hold but keeping him in a steely gaze, I expressed my disbelief with an eloquent snort.

"No, it's true. All Earthbound spirits, that's us, benefit from Bubble Tea and a few other food and drink items. They repair the damage we take in pursuing our assignments. We're not immortal in the exact sense of the word."

"We're dead! What could hurt us?"

"A lot of things. You will be surprised at precisely how dangerous the supernatural world can be to spirits."

Graves howled a mournful note, making me jump.

“Yes, Inverness,” said Alastair.

I opened my mouth to say something else and Alistair lifted my drink and put the straw in it. “Enough. Drink and believe.”

With a dismissive shrug, I slowly drank the tea. It was super tasty, I can’t lie. God, the calories. But I drank anyway and as I did, the baseball bat stopped banging me on the head. Aches and pains melted away.

“I’ll be double damned.”

Thunder rumbled and the Bubble Tea girl stepped out the door to stare at the sky.

“Oops,” I said.

Graves and Alistair looked at me anxiously.

I held up one hand, “Peace,” and returned to my Bubble Tea. I felt better. Maybe Alistair was right; Strawberry is a cheerful fruit.

Our steps were much lighter when we left the shop and walked to the station.

Onboard the light rail car, everyone once again cleared the area around us after one good look at Graves. All except a small girl who twisted away from her father and ran directly at him.

There was a collective gasp of horror as she threw her pudgy arms as far as they could reach around the giant wolf. Gasps were followed by relieved sighs when Graves delicately licked her head and cheeks and wagged his tail in a recognizably doggy way.

I fell more than sat on one of the empty seats. Alistair and Graves faced me. I had a lot of questions. Like: ‘Was this a typical day?” And “Do demons always explode.” You know, regular first-day-on-the-job stuff.

Instead, I led with, “Forgive my ignorance, but are cats and owls required to ride in the luggage rack on the Light Rail?”

Graves’ ears perked up and Alistair’s brows drew together. “Whatever do you mean? Cats and owls?”

I pointed to the other side of the car. Both swiveled around.

Alistair hissed in a very good imitation of a snake. Graves, who’d been sprawled on the carriage floor, popped up on all fours, his black fur standing on end.

An enormous black cat sat neatly tucked into the luggage rack, a long tail wrapped around its front paws. Next to the cat was a tawny owl with enormous eyes. Both creatures stared down at us.

“Greetings, Earthbound,” said the cat in a deep voice.

Alistair nervously cleared his throat, looking first at Graves then up again at the two creatures.

“Greetings, Ajax, Orin. To what...that is why...I mean...”

Graves nipped Alistair’s calf.

"*Ouch*! What do you want?"

"Who's the new girl?" asked the cat.

I'm not usually at a loss for words but being addressed by a cat was a disconcerting experience. All I could do was stare.

"She's our new weapons person."

"What happened to Inverness?" asked the cat.

Alistair's face went white and Graves's tail drooped.

I looked around wondering what the other passengers thought of this conversation. Except for the expected whispering about Graves, no one seemed to be paying any attention at all.

"Oh," said the cat coolly. "Bad luck."

The owl hooted.

"Yes, well. Our master wishes to speak with you. Midnight. At the Arboretum. Be down by the lake."

We pulled into the next station and the doors opened. The cat jumped on the owl, the bird spread its wings, swooped out the door, and flew away.

"Does that happen often on public transportation?" I asked.

Alistair sat down heavily beside me. "More than it should," he said in a mournful voice.

Graves mumbled and grumbled something in wolf.

"I know, I know. Why would their master want to see *us*?"

The way he said 'us' made me suspicious. "Why wouldn't the cat's master want to talk to you?" There's something I never thought I'd say.

"He should ask for Veronique and Raoul. Their office is downtown."

"Why?"

"Why are they downtown?"

I whacked him on the shoulder, "No. Why should the cat want Ralph."

"Raoul."

"Whoever."

"The cat's master is Bethel." He moved his hand above his head, "Up here sort of demon. We deal with," he moved his hand level with his knee, "down here sort of demons. Veronique and Raoul get the high-profile cases."

A nasty suspicious blossomed, "You mean we're the 'B' team?"

Graves woofed a canine chuckle.

"Not even close," said Alistair.

CHAPTER SIX: Hocus Focus

We crouched beside a giant palm on the muddy edges of the Los Angeles Arboretum's tropical lagoon. These turgid waters have been the location for many a jungle epic and tropical adventure from *The Road to Singapore* in 1947 to seventies TV hit *Fantasy Island*. Or so Alistair informed me as my legs went numb again. Not that either of those references made an impression on my foggy brain.

We'd been hiding in the jungle foliage Rambo-style waiting for the witching hour.

And waiting.

And waiting some more.

Despite Graves barking objections — he wanted to go home to the cafe, walk on two legs and wear pants apparently — we'd taken the train back to Arcadia at Alistair's insistence. We were barely in time for the last shuttle to the Arboretum and I'd asked them again, "Why don't you have a car? It's not really part of the punishment, is it?"

"Budget," explained Alistair, his body language closing in as if he was reluctant to discuss the subject. "We get our budget from the Infernal Revenue Service's mortal world-based Acolyte Network. You'll meet our liaison, Philippa, soon enough. The budget goes for food," he waggled his rail pass, "transportation, bribes for supernatural snitches, etc."

Graves barked and woofed.

"Exactly," nodded Alistair frowning. "We don't get the big bucks to take on high-profile demons."

Alistair's watch gave a soft buzzing alarm.

Midnight.

As we watched, a thick, white mist blossomed from the opposite shore.

It was a very Stephen King moment.

"I just remembered I have something important to do." I tried to stand but my feet had fallen asleep and instead, I flopped like a landed fish.

Alistair grabbed my sleeve and tugged me back under the twisted palm. "You haven't remembered anything because you're still in the Fog and you don't have anywhere to go because you're dead."

"There's Fog and *fog*," I said forcefully, pointing at the clouds, "and this fog is creeping me out."

Waves of cold white clouds swept across the water hiding everything. And I mean everything. As camouflage, it was certainly effective except it also camouflaged us so fully all we could see was mist.

Graves got to his feet, shaking the moisture off his fur. He growled, staring over the lake.

And that is when a trumpet fanfare blasted out and I screeched in surprise.

The trumpets sounded again and drums struck up a rousing crescendo.

“What the fuck!” I shouted.

“Ack!” Said Alistair just as loudly jumping away from a slim crack of lighting. He slipped on the mud and must have tumbled into Graves. I was guessing because the mist had grown so dense I couldn’t see either of them now.

A splash was followed by the sound of thrashing water and Graves let loose with piercing barks that I was sure translated to canine expletives.

“Sorry,” I apologized, figuring they’d tumbled into the lagoon.

The trumpets sounded right on top of us and I swore again. Luckily the fanfare was so noisy I guess Heaven couldn’t hear me.

A squishy sound of sloshing water and mud preceded Alistair and Graves looming over me as ghostly silhouettes.

“Crap!” I stepped back to avoid being splashed.

The lead trumpeter stepped out of the mist practically on top of me letting off an ear-splitting peal. Without thinking or maybe because that’s the sort of person I was when I was alive, I grabbed the trumpet out of his hands.

Holding it like a club, I whacked him over the head shouting, “Shut up! You’ll bring security down on us!”

The trumpeter, who looked human and was wearing a ridiculous Hollywood-style bright red Roman toga, gold armor, and a majorette’s hat topped with an enormous white plume, stopped in his tracks, one hand to his head.

I’d hit him rather hard.

Thanks to their effective fog camouflage, the rest of the marching band— because it was almost immediately apparent that is indeed what it was — didn’t see he’d stopped until too late. Several trumpeters behind crashed into him followed immediately by two rows of drummers.

Cymbals clashed, horns blared, and drums boomed. There was a lot of yelling. Since lighting did not rain down from on high, I gathered the heavenly edict against vulgarity did not apply to others. Not fair.

The fog lifted revealing a floating carriage wreathed in a soft golden light pulled by eagles. Yes, eagles. One, two, three, four...eight. Eight Bald Eagles. It bumped over the fallen band members as if they weren’t there.

Inside was a powerfully built blue man with long black wavy hair as glossy as Graves' fur. He had four arms. I counted them twice to be sure. He had enough gold jewelry wreathed over his arms and bare chest to finance the coup of a mid-sized country. He was bare to the waist and I could see some sort of white material rucked up around his waist under an enormous golden belt.

I dipped into the minestrone soup that was currently my brain and pulled up…Vishnu, maybe?

The big-time Hindu god was the preserver of something or other and often painted blue. He also had the four-arm thing if I recalled correctly. Though given the state of my brain, there was no guarantee any of that was correct.

Looking at the guy in the carriage more closely, I saw a long necklace of small skulls. It hung all the way to his belly, all of them decorated with sparkly jewels.

Skulls, skulls, skulls. Who had a necklace of skulls?

I dipped again.

Kali. The destroyer.

"Bugger!" The blue man shouted as the carriage alighted on a large bass drum and began to tip.

Okay. Probably not Kali. Kali would probably march around with a band of assassins rather than a horn section.

Band members jumped up to grab the girly-looking carriage — gold, lots of ribbons, and flowers — and hold it upright for their master.

I narrowed my eyes. "What's with the marching band, blue dude? You could wake the freaking dead."

Graves and Alistair cut their eyes to me like switchblades.

"Be quiet," Alistair hissed.

"Why?" I hissed right back. "What's he gonna' do? Kill us?"

Graves and Alistair approached the tipsy carriage and the blue being within.

Graves growled. Graves had a wide range of growls with quite diverse meanings. This growl seemed particularly aggressive. Perhaps Blue Guy thought so too as he did not immediately exit the carriage.

Alistair made a flourish and a short of half-bow, saying to me, "This is Bethel, a King in Hell."

"*Hell*, hell?" I asked staring hard at the guy.

"It's an honorary title," explained Alistair still bowing and flourishing.

I snorted a laugh.

"He is also King of Cats."

I snorted louder then realized the string of gilded and jeweled skulls around his neck were cat heads. All my inner bits clenched.

Okay, maybe not so funny.

Blue. Guy turned his eyes on me. They were purple from side to side and slit in the middle like a goat.

“I command eighty-five demon legions,” he said conversationally.

“Do you, indeed?” I replied in the same tone. “And yet you feel the need of a high school marching band.”

He made a face. “Not by choice. It was written in the Book of Solomon that I ride a pale horse and am preceded by a band of trumpeters.”

As if that explained it.

The eagles ruffled their feathers and shifted from their perches on top of various band members.

“On my planet,” I pointed out, “those are called birds, not horses.”

The blue man laughed. “You have no idea who I am, do you?”

“Nope. Looking at Alistair, I gather I’m supposed to be shakin’ in my boots. However, I died earlier so everything else seems somewhat anti-climactic.”

“I like this one,” said the blue man, laughing. “Much more fun than Inverness.”

Two of the eagles flapped and pulled at their harness as a pair of drummers attempted to crawl out from beneath them.

“Whoa,” he pulled at the reins, “steady on there!”

Alistair shoved me behind him. “We were surprised to receive your summons, King Bethel.”

“I bet you were!”

Graves grumbled. Unlike Alistair, he did not seem in awe of the large demon. As a two-hundred fifty-pound wolf with teeth the size of fruit knives, probably very little scared him.

“I am here,” Bethel started to say when a cymbal clashed loudly and a base drum boomed as the marching band tried to get to their feet.

Bethel glared at them and every musician froze where they stood or crouched or lay.

I took this opportunity to ask, “He’s a demon, right? Do we kill him now?”

If humans and wolves could shoot poison darts with their minds, I’d have been a pin cushion.

I directed my own poison-dart stare defiantly back. “I was forced into the Demon Slaying Squad, and by gosh, I will slay some demons.”

“Now you care?” asked Alistair spreading his hands. “Now?”

“Bubble Tea has given me courage,” I declared, saluting. And it had. Being dead had once again faded into the Fog. I felt super sassy. Like Sheila No.1. In his heels.

“Demon slaying squad?” The blue man quirked an eyebrow and spread both sets of arms wide. “Raoul said that had been updated to a Peace Keeping Initiative, the PKI. Emphasis on ‘peace.’ He even gave me a business card.”

“Cuz that makes it legit,” I snorted.

Alistair clasped his hand tightly in front of him. Probably to keep from knocking me over the head.

“That is certainly one interpretation of our mandate, your highness, and not without merit.”

Your highness?

Graves’ ears flicked forward and gave Alistair an acerbic, “Woof!”

Much could be gleaned from that simple woof. My interpretation was ‘Kiss up!’

“Well, that is not how the enormous red-headed angel with the peacock wings explained it to me,” I said shouldering my way in front of Alistair and laying a hand on my belt. “She said we were supposed to exterminate with extreme malice any demons the squad encounters. I have a righteous flashlight and I am not afraid to use it.”

The eagles seemed to recognize the flashlight for the weapon it was.

Furiously flapping their wings as they attempted to take off in several directions.

Lord Blue Man grabbed the reigns with all four arms, tugging furiously.

“Whoa Dasher, easy Dancer. Prancer, Vixen! Settle down.”

Dasher? Dancer?

Eight eagles.

“Oh my fucking God. Let me guess.”

I had to pause as lighting struck one of the palms scattering fronds like confetti. “Sorry! Their names are Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, and Blitzen. You named your eagles after Santa’s fu...” I paused and amended the sentence, “freaking reindeer?”

“You try remembering eight names in a row!” he said with a defensive whine, snapping the reins and jiggling the eagles back into place. “Can you remember eight names?”

Immediately I counted off on my fingers, “Marcia, Jan, Cindy, Greg, Peter, Bobby, Carol, Mike.”

“And who are they?”

“The Brady Bunch, duh. Plus, Alice, the maid. That makes nine.” I gave him a superior smirk, quickly adding, “Sleepy, Bashful, Dopey, Doc, Grumpy, Sneezy, Happy. That’s the Seven Dwarves, and Snow White makes eight.”

Round-eyed Alistair stared at me. “You can’t remember your last name; how could you do that?”

I shrugged but honestly, I was as surprised as him. My soupy brain was full of surprises.

Blue-man waved several hands in a dismissive gesture. “Who cares. It doesn’t matter what I call them. As I said, I usually ride Pale Horse.”

“You mean *a* pale horse,” I corrected.

“No. Pale Horse. His name is Pale Horse because he is pale.”

I never got the chance to laugh. Alistair clamped a hand around my face, yanking me one palm tree and two giant ferns over.

Whispering viciously, his breath hot in my ear, he said, “Will you be quiet! Do not threaten Bethel. LA is his dominion!”

“This is Pasadena,” I pointed out.

“Arcadia,” he corrected. “Greater LA, *including* Orange County are his.”

“And we kiss his butt? I didn’t realize that was how the game was played.” I pumped as much contempt as possible into my voice. So what if I’d only learned demons were real a few hours ago? I had opinions now.

“Bethel is a king. He is also close to immortal. We cannot kill him. Instead, we try to contain his supernatural activities as much as possible. It’s a balance. A dangerous game we play. Sometimes we’re on top. Sometimes he is.”

“I can hear you!” shouted the demon king in question.

“Stars in the heavens Morgan, let us do the talking until you at least learn the demon/Earthbound status quo.”

He frog-marched me back to the shore.

Bethel had both sets of arms crossed over his big blue chest and was tapping one index finger against a muscular forearm. “Are you ready now? Is it convenient to continue?”

The band members looked nervously at each other, and the eagles folded their wings tightly and put their heads down.

Oh, he was pissed.

Alistair performed another bow and a wavy hand motion movement to continue.

“Pale Horse is the reason I called this meeting. He is under the weather. Rather like a lot of horses around here.” He frowned.

“Did you have him at the racetrack?” I asked. Alistair dug me in the ribs with his elbow to be quiet and I stomped on his foot.

“I have a string of thoroughbreds on the racing circuit. I bring Pale Horse to the track occasionally to run and see his friends.”

I drew one finger across my throat.

“Why is she doing that!” he demanded, standing and pointing at me.

I hummed the death march and jumped out of Alistair's reach.

Bethel looked alarmed.

Alistair hastily explained about the viral nastiness of Squid-a-Puss and Octo-Bear and the effect it was having on the racehorses. He finished with, "Pale Horse could be infected. Your other horses as well."

"Is there a cure?"

Alistair looked to Graves who barked out an answer.

Bethel gave a relieved sigh. "I shall remove my horses to our stable to let them recover."

No one said anything for a little while. Since I had no idea where this conversation was going, I kept quiet.

"I knew something was amiss," the demon said at last. "The horses were performing poorly. Racing revenue had dropped. I approached Raoul and Victoria. However, they assured me nothing supernatural was behind it."

Graves and Alistair exchanged a look I couldn't interpret.

"Demons crippling racehorses for fun and profit," Bethel said nodding. "A sweet little scam." He frowned and snapped his fingers at the bass drummer standing near the carriage. Immediately the drummer banged out an ominous rhythm. *Boom, boom, boom, boom! Drum roll. Boom, boom, boom!*

Snapping his fingers again, the drummer stopped.

"However, it is not my sweet little scam and they were not my demons."

Graves growled. He had things to say and said them.

I tugged at Alistair's sleeve insistently.

With a sigh, he explained, "Graves is asking if someone is challenging Bethel in his home territory. In the Demon Lands and if that's spilling over into our world."

'*DEMON LANDS?*' I thought in all caps. Whoa, mama. Angel lady had used those words, I remembered. They'd just been gibberish at the time.

I looked expectantly at the big blue demon.

"I feel this is less a *me* and more of a *you* problem," said the King, adjusting his skirts and settling into the seat. "Something knocking at your door and inconveniencing me. Earthbound, I suggest you clean house."

He snapped his fingers and the band struggled to their feet and back into formation. The Eagles took to the wing and damn if the trumpets didn't start blaring all over again.

Alistair said something.

"What?" I shouted.

He tried again.

"*What*?"

We waited as the whole crazy company disappeared into the mist. The clouds drew back. The churning water on the lagoon returned to its placid muddy-colored state.

"Bethel is saying there are Earthbound spirits involved in some sort of scam. Spirits like us."

"What the hell?" I said, not caring what heaven thought of my mouth at this point.

Heaven did nothing so I guess they were just as confused as me.

CHAPTER **SEVEN**: Deep in the Closet

The grinding buzz of an industrial-strength blender dragged me back to the land of the living. Sort of.

I groggily lifted my head.

Two guys with backpacks, poor posture, and poorer fashion taste stood at the cafe counter. Zayn was whipping up some concoction for them.

The door chimes jingled and a girl came in, also with a backpack, though she had better posture.

I was stretched out on the long bench by the far wall. Why?

My brain felt as fuzzy as my mouth.

Everything hurt. Head to toes. Little laser tag shots of pain were ping, ping, pinging my neck.

"Freaking, freaking, frack, frack," I muttered watching my language. Lightning bolts were not my friends this morning. At least until I'd had my coffee.

Yesterday was the weirdest day of my life. My heart gave a lurch.

Correction. Afterlife.

Even with no memory, I was sure nothing could top waking up in heaven, being tossed out on my ass, meeting the wolfman and a long-legged gator, battling two freakish demons armed with a flashlight and my potty mouth, and listening to the marching band of a four-armed demon king riding an eagle-drawn carriage.

We'd stumbled in after three having barely made the last train of the night.

Graves morphed back to a human as soon as he crossed the threshold. Alistair was again an alligator and instead of yoga pants, I was back in my skirt and boxy tee. Zayn had popped up from behind the counter when we stumbled in.

I went to the glass fridge by the counter to grab a bottle of water and saw a thick pile of blankets on the floor.

"Were you sleeping?"

Zayn nodded the flames on his horns only glowing embers.

Graves was also chugging water and I whacked him on the back. "You make him sleep on the floor like a medieval servant?"

He gurgled, choked, coughed, and wiped his face with the back of his sleeve. "What is with all the hitting? *Sheesh.* He doesn't like it upstairs."

"I don't like it upstairs," echoed Zayn.

I vaguely remembered asking “Where’s upstairs?” as I took my water and slumped onto the long bench at the back of the cafe.

Graves mumbled some answer but I was gone.

Yawning, I swiped at my bangs and waited for Zayn to finish with the paying customers.

“Can I have mucho, mucho espresso?” I mumbled, staggering over and falling onto one of the counter stools.

The cafe had a giant European coffee machine so we must have coffee despite all the froo-froo fruity pastel drinks illustrated on the big blackboard menu behind the counter. Illustrated very professionally actually.

“Give me a minute,” Zayn said moving to

I took a deep sip and spit out the mouthful of coffee, mostly all over Zayn.

“Not again,” he sighed.

I held the ceramic cup up, “You put tapioca in my espresso? Are you crazy?”

“It will make you feel better,” he explained wiping himself off with a damp cloth.

“No, it won’t!” I grabbed a plastic spoon from the counter and started spooning the chewy balls into the saucer, swearing silently under my breath.

Zayn turned to brew a tapioca-free cup and I poured what was left of mine into it.

Alistair was reading a newspaper. A real, honest-to-God paper one over in the corner.

Graves was on a slim tablet with a portable keyboard tapping away and making faces at the screen. He didn’t look very happy

Through the big plate-glass window, I watched as four young men piled out of a battered white van in the handicapped parking spot by our front door. All of them were dressed in dark colors, black hoodies pulled close around their faces. The driver stayed in the car.

Gee, that didn’t look suspicious. Not at all.

They crowded around the café’s front door. One put a hand up to push it open only to stop. A rumble of thunder shook the café.

Alistair and Graves both looked up.

“Wasn’t me,” I quickly said.

Zayn swiveled around to stare at the entrance.

A Richter-scale worthy boom followed rolling from the back of the café to the front. I grabbed the counter to keep from falling off the stool. The wave knocked the hoodie boys onto their asses. A flurry of lighting zapped down, sending them falling all over themselves to get back in the van.

The driver burned rubber getting out of the parking lot and nearly smashed into a city bus on Colorado Avenue as the gang tried to get away. A last jagged zap of lightning popped off the driver's side mirror.

The floor and walls gave a little shake and all was quiet again.

Alistair went back to his paper, Graves to his tablet, and Zayn poured out my new cup of espresso.

As he set it down, I asked, "Is nobody going to talk about what just happened.?"

Zayn popped an eyebrow.

I waved a hand at the door. "The café just chased out that group of hoodie boys."

"Yes, it did," said Alistair from behind his paper.

"Because…" I prompted impatiently.

He lowered the paper, his voice equally impatient. "Protection protocols," and flipped it back up.

"The Outpost is not a mere building," said Zayn. "It is not alive, but it has a sort of spiritual essence. "

I stopped him. "What outpost? What are you talking about?"

"Didn't they tell you in processing?"

"She didn't have processing," Alistair said.

"Oh right. I forgot. The café is called an Outpost. More on that later. This building has threshold spells all around it, below, above, everywhere. Should the building sense danger, protection protocols are immediately triggered. A battalion could not enter without the passcode."

This time I popped an eyebrow. "Passcode?"

"There's a manual bypass for emergencies to open or close the building," Graves said over his shoulder. "Verbal. A spell. Alistair oversees that."

Alistair raised one clawed hand in acknowledgment.

I started to say something, Graves cut me off. "In case we need to trigger it while we're outside. I can't talk in wolf form."

"That's not what I was going to ask. What you're saying is the building made of concrete and bricks and steel can sense danger?"

Graves and Zayn nodded. Maybe Alistair did as well behind his newspaper.

"The building?"

They nodded again.

"Their intent was probably to rob us," Zayn said pulling fruit out of the cold drawer and placing it on the chopping board.

"The afterlife is on crack," I sighed and sipped my cooling coffee.

“Who wants to know their horoscope?” Alistair said.

Zayn raised a hand, “Me first!”

Before Alistair could tell Zayn what the day held in store for him the door chimes jingled. A slim sylph of a girl swept into the cafe. Asian. Sleek ponytail. Capri-length pink camo yoga pants and a faded double ‘G’ logo tee.

This time the café gave what I interpreted as a happy little buzz that tickled the soles of my feet.

Graves jumped away from the table and went to kneel by Alistair who immediately folded his paper and placed it on the table.

I stared at the sudden flurry of movement. Why was Graves on the floor?

The girl, beaming a smile at all, high-fived Alistair, saying “Hey Dude!” and practically jumped on Graves burying her face in his chest and mussing his hair.

“Who’s a good puppy, who’s a good puppy?” she said in a coaxing voice.

My coffee dribbled out of my mouth onto the counter. “What-the-fu...”

Zayn grabbed my shirt pulling me off the stool dragging me to the far end of the counter before I could finish my sentence.

Pushing him off with both hands I angled around the corner and kicked him in the shin. “Don’t yank me around!”

“Ow! Why are you so violent? She sees us as we appear outside the door,” he whispered in a hushed voice rubbing his leg

The girl was now pawing Graves all over and asking if he wanted a belly rub.

Magic door. Right. Graves was a wolf outside and Alistair was human.

“But she is *inside* the door!” I pointed out.

“Did you guys feel the earthquake?” she asked, still vigorously petting Graves.

Alistair nodded as he got up and walked to my side of the café. “Maybe it was construction or something.”

“Yeah maybe. Hey Zayn, how about a Tropical Passion with an immune boost?”

“Coming right up.” He moved back to his station by the blenders.

“Explain,” I demanded sotto voce from Alistair. “Why she is petting Graves.”

“It’s complicated. As you saw, when we go out, I am a normal-looking man. Graves is a giant wolf. Those manifestations Heaven insists we wear as penance.”

“Wait, wait. Wolf, I get. How is looking human penance for you? Are you actually an alligator?”

“I’m a Püca. I told you.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “And that explains exactly what?”

Alistair pursed his lips, his face tight. “Pücas are shapeshifters. At least my sort of Püca is. They deny me that. I can only be human. Or the alligator man. Imagine the boredom.”

“I guess it’s like being forced to wear the same outfit day after day. Oh. Like me, from now on.” I flicked my stupid skirt.

“Not the same thing at all!” He sounded peevish. “Much worse for Graves. Think about it. When humans, living, ordinary ones, come through the magic door they see our *outside* bodies. Ergo, she thinks Graves is a giant dog.”

“He’s enjoying that,” I grimaced as she kissed him on the forehead.

“And you’re not trapped in...” he wriggled his fingers at my outfit, “that. Once we finish the transformation, you can change into whatever you want. Your clothes aren’t glued on like some sort of cheap plastic doll.”

I was digesting this factoid as the girl skipped merrily over, a cheek-stretching smile on her heart-shaped face, hand out. She had tiny sparkly gems in daisy patterns on each silver nail. “Hi, I’m Trahn. From *Trahnsformative Nails n*ext door.”

“And I am?” I said to Alistair as I shook her delicate bird-like hand.

“Trahn, this is Morgan. My stepsister. Going to be staying with us, um, helping with marketing.”

“Cool!” She nodded, all wide-eyed.

What brand of mascara was she using, because her lashes looked like sable fur and I said so.

“Thanks! It’s Japanese. Crazy cheap. Like six dollars in Tokyo. My cousin is married to a Japanese and lives there. She gets it for me. If you want one, let me know.”

She flashed me a big smile and I could not help smiling back. She was so SoCal perky.

“So, Morgan, are you, you know, all digital marketing and stuff or more real world?”

“Otherworld, actually.”

Alistair pinched me so I stepped on his foot.

Trahn gave a peal of laughter. “Awesome. Come over anytime and I’ll give you a free gel nail do-over.” She looked critically at my hand in hers.

I pulled it away and stuck it in the slash pocket on my skirt. That was justified. My nails looked like I’d dug my way out of the grave. I was going to take her up on that invitation ASAP.

“Am I in time for the horoscopes?” she said all chirpy and bright.

“Absolutely.” Alistair returned to his newspaper. Sitting, he proceeded to read the Gemini forecast for Trahn, Taurus for Zayn, Leo for himself, Pisces for Graves (Trahn insisted the dog needed to know).

Zayn walked out from behind the counter to hand her an oversized frothy orange drink. “I put in an extra dose of protein powder as well.”

She took a long sip. “Yum! Your stuff is the best. My day can’t start without one of your smoothies. I even have to come on my day off or I just feel wrong. Hey! What about your sister, Alistair?” She looked at me. “What sign are you?”

My mind went blank. Good question. I didn’t know my last name much less a birth month.

Alistair cleared his throat and said without missing a beat, “Scorpio, because she stings.”

Trahn laughed and I glared at the gator.

Alistair and the LA Times said my day would be full of challenges.

No shit.

Trahn handed a folded bill to Zayn. “See you guys later. Welcome to the neighborhood, Morgan.” She skipped out giving Graves’ head a final pat.

His handsome face was flushed and there were beads of sweat on his forehead as he pulled himself back to a standing position. It must be awkward having people think you were a dog.

“Does she try and give you biscuits?” I asked.

Graves turned even redder.

“She did in the beginning,” laughed Zayn. “We had to tell her he was on a special diet.”

The chimes above the door jingled again and two burly guys in beater tanks and bulgy muscles came in.

“Come on,” Alistair said. “I’ll show you your room.”

I pulled him to a stop. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. I have a room? Why did you make me sleep on the bench!”

“We didn’t make you do anything.” He pried my fingers off his arm. “You fell asleep and we left you there.”

He placed one hand on the edge of the big framed mirror and easily swung it open revealing a narrow stairway. With a tilt of his chin, he motioned me inside, closing the hidden door silently behind us.

We stood for a moment in the cramped foyer.

“Well, go.”

I went.

The top of the narrow stairway led to another foyer that split into a ‘V’ shape, a hallway on both sides. We took the hall on the right.

Alistair pointed at a door.

“This is me. My bedroom.” He pointed at another door next to it. “My and Graves bathroom.”

We rounded the corner.

“Graves room is here.”

The door was open. I saw an unmade bed. Otherwise, the small room seemed clean enough. It looked manly: leather armchair and footrest in some dark textile print in the corner, stand lamp, Persian carpet, wooden desk under a small window.

Alistair swung open the next door. “This is your room now.”

I looked in and sighed in despair. Whoever decorated it went shopping at Beige World. Beige bedding, beige curtains, beige carpet. All your beige dreams fulfilled.

He pointed to another door and opened it. “At least your bathroom is ensuite, which is nice. Right?”

‘Ensuite’ made the room sound more glamourous than it was. The bathroom tile and walls were faded jade green. Yellowing acrylic sliding doors hid the bath. A rectangular window of glazed glass sat inside that. Sink. Built-in cabinets. Mirror. Unlike the aging decor of the rest of the room, the toilet was sparkling white, full of buttons and lights.

“Inverness had it put in. It’s Japanese.”

“Ace,” I said and meant it.

The place was scrubbed and clean. No mold or gunk. The countertop was clear of clutter. Threadbare beige towels neatly folded on the rack. No toothbrush or razor. Alistair must have thrown away Inverness’s stuff after he died. Again.

Back in the bedroom, I parted the faded beige curtains to look out the window next to the bed: narrow alley, dumpsters, somebody’s backyard fence.

My face must have reflected my feelings.

“You can do whatever you want with it, of course,” Alistair said hastily. “Inverness didn’t really care much for decorating.”

“Or color,” I added.

I sat on the bed, contemplating the drabness of my new afterlife. “How can I make changes? I haven’t got any money.”

“Oh, no, not true. You get a little salary. We all do.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket and touched a dollar-sign app. “See. It will come through your phone. Which you should receive shortly.”

“I have money?”

“Monthly stipend. Not a lot but enough to fix this place up. I always thought it would look nice in blue. You know?”

Tears welled up in my eyes and my nose started to run.

“That’s good,” I said in a wobbly voice. “Really good.”

Alistair sat next to me, curling his long tail to the side. The bed sagged so far I had to adjust my balance to avoid falling on top of him.

“I won’t lie,” he said, “demon slaying is a rough assignment. Also, Graves, Zayn, me, we can all be wankers. As can you, I gather.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Don’t deny it!”

Taking a deep breath, I admitted he was right, they were jerks.

He laughed.

“But we’re not prisoners. We can take a walk, go to a film, have a pint of beer or glass of wine. Heaven can be cold,” he ran a hand in front of his green scaly body. “And yet, the afterlife is not only in the minus column.”

Getting back to his feet, he indicated the door. “There’s something else you have to see.”

I followed him to the other side of the hall.

“This is Zayn’s room.”

He opened the door and I peeked in.

It was bigger than mine. Sort of ‘Thousand- and One-Nights’ decor. Several layers of paisley curtains, thick richly colored carpets of different sizes. An oversized chair draped in what looked like blankets and maybe fur. A low, oblong table with cushions around it and a simple pallet bed piled with pillows.

It looked like a cozy escape from the cafe.

“So you really don’t make him sleep on the floor?”

“Zayn is a Djinn. No one outside of heaven makes him do anything he doesn’t want. The problem is the closet.”

“He’s afraid of closets, too?” I asked

“He’s afraid of this one,” said Alistair in an ominous tone.

He pointed across the hall to a paneled door along the left-hand wall.

“This,” he waved a hand around the hall, “place, the grounds of the cafe, where we live, is called an Outpost. Like I started to explain downstairs. It is far more than a building. Outposts are built over Portals into the Mortal World. This is but one of many around the world. In California, there are outposts in San Diego and Palm Springs. Then one in Phoenix and another in Portland. Every Demon Squad is housed in an Outpost. One of our charges is guarding the Portals to see nothing nasty gets through.”

The door bulged slightly and I jumped.

“There’s something inside?” I spluttered.

He nodded.

“Something nasty?”

“Yes. This is a vital part of our service to heaven. We protect the Portal. Ensuring the integrity of the seals on the door. Keeping what is inside from getting out.”

“You’re saying we have literal monsters in the closet?”

“Not monsters. Gods.”

“Okay, now you’re just messing with me,” I scoffed, reaching for the doorknob.

Alistair grabbed my hand and pushed me out of the way. “No!” His voice was practically shrill. “No, really. Truly.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I narrowed my eyes. “Still not buying it.”

“For God... I mean, heaven’s sake. Why did you have to miss your Afterlife 101 class? Human souls and spirits have incalculable energy. We have helped to create or at least empower our gods and lesser deities since people were people. In the past, far, far past, thanks to the infinite creativity of the human mind, the godly pantheons became too crowded. It was chaotic both on earth and above. A group of heavenly hosts decided to thin the pantheons out. Consolidate worshippers and the energy they create. There was a war. Most of the older gods plus their attendant spirits or Demi-Gods were imprisoned.”

He pointed at the door.

“You are...”

He pressed his hand over my mouth before I could finish a well-deserved ‘fucking kidding me!’

“Fewer gods meant more energy. More power and control. Before you ask, Angels were the deciding factor in the war.”

I hadn’t thought to ask that.

“Never underestimate them as soldiers. Angels, I mean. Christian, Moslem, and Buddhist Gods now control the balance of power. Hinduism threw in with their lot as well, so it still has some localized pull.”

Prying his hand away from my mouth, I looked closely at his face. He wasn’t just sincere, he was frightened. Alligators can look frightened. I was learning so many new things.

“They trapped the old Gods?”

“Yes.”

“In closets? Hall closets were their secure facility of choice?”

He whipped his tail back and forth in agitation and snapped his long jaws open and closed. “It’s far more than a closet. That’s just the illusion the spell takes. In the past, they were caves, stone circles, bottomless pits. Outposts evolved along with civilization.”

“Is it locked? Because you sort of freaked out when I almost touched it.”

He hesitated and I wasn't' sure he was going to answer. Finally, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Spelled. The door is spelled. I don't know why I jumped. The spell locks it against the unworthy. People like... you know... like us. I can't open it. Neither can Graves or Zayn and of course..."

"Me," I finished for him.

"You."

Ouch

"What about Angels?"

He shook his head. "Especially not Angels. They rebelled once. The Heavenly Host understands they could again."

I stared at the closet, still only half believing him.

"As long as the door remains closed, what is inside can never get out. Understand?"

I nodded. Sure. Why not?

"Also, it may try to talk to you. Don't listen. It will say anything it can to get you to help. That's why Zayn refuses to sleep upstairs. Graves and I have both offered him our rooms but he refuses. He says he can hear it whisper everywhere upstairs."

"Can you?"

"No. Who or what is inside has no interest in me."

"Graves."

"The same."

Zayn heard it. The 'whatever' inside was interested in him.

"Hey, it could be worse," he said with forced cheerfulness. "We could have a monster under the bed portal!"

I didn't laugh.

"Hello?" called a woman's voice from the first floor. "Alistair? Are you up there?"

"Yikes!" Alistair jumped. He swept around and his tail knocked me off my feet.

"Awk!" I squawked, falling to the floor.

"Sorry, sorry," mumbled Alistair picking me back up.

He ran a hand over his head as if he was smoothing his hair — which he did not have as an alligator — and tugged at his suit.

"It's Philippa," he said a little breathlessly. He spun around and dashed down the stairs.

Sidestepping his tail in a hop, I half fell against the closet door.

It was smooth and hot and not in a good way. Like a snake. Pulling away, my skin stuck to it just enough to boost the creep factor significantly.

"Who's Philippa?" I called.

“Morgan,” whispered a voice from inside the closet.

I gulped.

“Morgan. Vengeance.”

There were several rough, hoarse voices speaking.

Not an ‘it’, a ‘they.’

“Vengeance? Why would I want that?” I managed to stutter.

The closet door bulged out in the shape of three grinning faces. “You were murdered.”

CHAPTER EIGHT: Frenemy Fire

Zayn and Alistair picked up the chairs and tables as the roll of thunder slowly drifted away. A smoke alarm was blaring. The cafe smelled like burning rubber.

"Would you stop swearing!" Graves growled climbing on top of the counter and poking the smoke alarm with a broom handle.

The noise stopped.

"Faces," I pointed my fingers around my mouth, "door!" I opened and closed my hands, "Voices! They said I was murdered!"

Graves jumped down. "Didn't Alistair tell you not to get too close? And for heaven's sake don't listen. The voices are full of lies. They say whatever they think you want to hear."

"I did tell her that!" Alistair protested. He was sheltering in the doorway, half in and half out.

"How do they know what to say?" My hands were trembling. I shoved them inside my pockets. The cold, slithery voices and their whisper of murder echoed in my head.

He shrugged off my question. "Later. Philippa is here." He gestured to the front door.

It swung all the way open. "Is it safe to come back in?" asked a woman's voice.

Alistair moved out of the way. "Yes, please, so sorry about that. Newly dead. Control issues," he said laughing in a silly way.

I looked over at the woman, temporarily shoving haunted closets to one side.

This was Philippa. Our Liaison. Which, I gathered, meant she was sort of our boss.

Brown skin, raven hair shot through with red-gold streaks. Fully as tall as all three men here. Okay, two men and an alligator. Green eyes, a little overboard on the black eyeliner, full mouth, red lipstick. Strong, masculine features. Though there was nothing masculine about her bountiful breasts and curvaceous hips squeezed into a cap sleeve royal blue dress nipped at the waist. The blue snakeskin kitten heels perfectly matched the color of the dress.

I hated her on sight.

"This is it?" said a woman pointing at me.

"I am not an *it*, bit..."

Graves clamped a large hand over my mouth.

"Don't, please," he entreated.

I glared at him. He dropped his hand and stepped away.

The woman took his place, moving in a little too close. She appraised me up and down with a sour look on her face. "This is your new weapons guy?"

After a moment of silence, Graves said, “Yes. Morgan. She took out two demons yesterday with her flashlight.”

I composed my features into what I hoped was a, ‘Yeah. Two! In your face!’ look.

Alistair was staring at the woman, too. Except he looked sort of puppyish. If you have never seen an alligator look puppyish, it is quite an interesting sight. Like he was waiting for her to throw the ball so he could fetch it. His scaly tail swept back and forth and his lips were pulled back showing too many teeth.

“Weapons gal. Yes. What’s it to you?” I said tilting my chin up.

“Let me make this clear, weapons person. You,” she pointed a perfect apricot-colored gel nail at me, “are down here. Under my thumb. Me,” she pointed up, “I am up there. I am your Liaison with heaven. The liaison for the entire team. If you want something, you must go through me.”

The hair on my arms stood and my nerves went all tingly. Was that a threat?

“And the Acolytes organization,” said Graves. “You work with them.”

She cut her eyes to him and frowned, “I believe you mean they work with me.”

Oooooh, burn.

If Graves had been in his wolf form, I think his lip would have curled over an oversized fang. Perhaps no love lost between liaison-lady and the wolfman?

Meanwhile, Alistair stood in the middle of the room nodding like an alligator-shaped bobblehead.

The ear-splitting grind of one of the smoothie blenders made me jump.

Zayn. A few seconds later, he walked to her side. He leaned forward to hand over a creamy yellow drink in a tall cup with a pink straw.

Was that a *bow*?

“Did you just bow to her?” I hadn’t meant to blurt that thought out. Too late now.

He gave me what can only be described as a *deer in the headlights* look.

Philippa ignored me. “Thank you, Zayn.” She paused to take a long sip. “Oh, yum! Mango and pineapple?”

“With a bit of guava,” said the Djinn making a pinching motion with his fingers. He stood there uncertainly for a few moments more. The flames on his horns flickered weakly.

I looked from him to Alistair and then Graves.

Gator man was in awe of Philippa.

She made Zayn nervous. He was trying hard to please her.

In contrast, Graves’ mouth was twisted down, eyebrows pressed together. I don’t think he liked her at all.

Good.

Because after that ‘you are down here, I am up there’ remark, I didn’t like her either.

She turned away from Zayn with a dismissive movement of her smoothie. “Speaking of demons. That was a nasty business at the racecourse. Demons making the horses sick, correct?”

“You know about that already?” Graves said.

She blinked. Once. Twice.

‘*Hmmm*,’ I thought loudly to myself.

“I keep informed,” she said after a pause. “That’s part of my job. However, you should have informed me when you began this investigation.”

‘*Nice bit of deflection*,’ I thought. Because that is exactly what it was.

Graves crossed his arms over his chest and frowned harder. Frowning seemed to be one of his talents in both human and wolf form. “Inverness was the one who started the investigation. We weren’t sure it was anything but speculation. After he disappeared, we found the first body and just ran with it.”

He went on to describe the nasty loop of bodies, bacteria, infection, feeding, and inevitable equine death.

“Twenty-four horses dead so far this year and counting. At least four humans were murdered, probably more. We didn’t dig up all the corpses. Too much exposure.”

“Which is precisely why you should have consulted me.” Philippa flared her teardrop-shaped nostrils and I realized who she reminded me of.

The peacock-winged angel who’d tossed me out of heaven. They had the same sort of nostrils. Though why I would notice nostrils I couldn’t say. Maybe I’d been a plastic surgeon in my former life?

“The track is a far too public venue,” she continued, her tone verging on imperious. “Raoul and Veronique should have been called in once you were sure it was demons. High profile cases are for the Alpha Team.”

I got the feeling she was mentally clenching her teeth. Something had pissed her off about this case.

‘Hmmm,’ again.

Graves continued smoothly, “We believed it was just a local infestation. Not worth their time. However, after consideration, it could be happening at other racecourses as well.”

“So of course...” Philippa prompted.

The muscles in Graves’ jaw tightened. “We will hand this over to you.”

I did not believe that is what he thought for a minute.

“Were they making money off this?” she asked.

Alistair appeared to finally focus on the conversation. “Money? Yes, money. Bethel...”

Graves cut him off, “Bethel is one of our suspects. We’re not sure if the demons were his. It is possible that gambling was a motive.”

He gave Alistair one of the poison-dart looks and Alistair had the presence of mind to shut his big gator mouth.

“If so, Bethel is an obvious choice. He has the most to gain.” Philippa looked down, smoothing her already perfectly smooth skirt. “Leave this for the team downtown. They’ll take it from here.”

To my surprise, none of the men objected. I kept quiet, too. There was so much subtext to both the conversations and the body language in the room, even I in my newbie dead state could feel it.

She turned, dress flaring in a pretty pirouette. The meeting appeared to be over. “I’ve left the packet for the new girl on the counter.” She pointed and I followed her hand. A small brown cardboard box was indeed there. “Cell phone, keys, etc. Keita Yamaguchi, isn’t it?” She indicated my outfit with another motion of her smoothie.

Not sure where this was going, I nodded.

“People say his shirts make them look fat. I say it’s not the cut of the cloth that’s responsible.”

And she was out the door.

A hop, skip, and a jump, and I would have had her by the ass if Alistair and Graves hadn’t jumped into action. Blocking my way, they held me back until the door shut.

“Bitch just called me fat!” I snarled.

The two men’s eyes shot skyward. Zayn vaulted back over the counter and hid.

No lightning rained down.

No thunder.

‘Damn straight,’ I thought. Even the Angels knew swearing is sometimes justified.

CHAPTER NINE: 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. “So there!”

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. 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 am 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. “Maybe 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."

"*Whaaat*? Angels and humans do the deed?" I was caught between fascinated and completely grossed 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 it’s been twenty-four hours.”

“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 to the counter, his back to us.

“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 TEN: 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.

Craft beer.

The infield was hosting a beer and food festival with some 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 thought I could get behind.

The package the curvaceous Philippa brought had a cell phone 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 our 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 by picking movies I liked, hoping to find clues to my past. Dang it all, I couldn't remember any 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. He spun to face me.

"*Rrrrroool*," 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,' Lassie 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.

We barreled back through the tunnel to the main grounds. As I tried to keep up. All I could do was hold tightly to the harness 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.

Graves had announced his suspicions 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 making me lose my grip on his harness.

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.

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 yelled and cursed. The 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 knocking me 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 and rubbed 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 in front of me before the shadow overhead dropped like a bomb.

There was only time to exclaim, “What the...” before feathered bodies exploded into motion. I was engulfed 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 in place, I pushed against the onslaught of feathered bodies to reach my weapons. My fingers closed on something hard and smooth. The phone charger. I jerked it off the catch.

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 just 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 stung 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 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, face 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, both on the move.

Raoul was already in the car. He gave them a jaunty wave out of the open driver's side window and turned the ignition.

The car exploded into a massive fireball.

CHAPTER **ELEVEN: Clean Sweep**

I woke up on the ground. Coughing and hacking through a haze of black smoke. The baseball bat was whacking me in the head again. At least I wasn't throwing up.

My stomach lurched.

Oops, spoke too soon.

Beer, truffle fries, and concussions are not friends. At least not my friends.

Once an empty-stomach equilibrium had been restored, I got to my hands and knees and with the help of a nearby fender, to my feet.

Smoke poured from at least three burning wrecks, maybe more. The explosion had taken down every car nearby. It smelled awful. Worse than when I'd zapped the demon to ash with my flashlight. Yet somehow like the decomposing body in the stall.

Oh, maybe because the elusive Raoul was inside. That thought went right to my bowels. Yikes. I needed a bathroom. Seriously.

A fire truck roared to a stop and more sirens were approaching. In a minute, the firefighters had hoses out. White foam poured out onto the flames.

Alistair was leaning against the car across from me. He was on his cell phone. I heard "Veronique," and "Santa Anita." I didn't see Graves.

"Bathroom," I choked out and hurried across the parking lot.

The gate attendant waved me through first asking if I needed the paramedics.

"Just the bathroom, please."

He didn't seem convinced but pointed me in the right direction.

Once the rest of my stomach had dissolved, I went to the sink and looked at my reflection.

Crikey.

No wonder the gate attendant asked me about paramedics.

I was a horrorfest. My face. My clothes. What was in my hair?

My jacket went into the sink. Same for my shoes. I soaped and rinsed my face and arms, then soaped and rinsed some more.

A couple of women in pretty spring dresses, heels, and Dry Bar beautiful hair walked in. They came to a full stop at the sight of me, half-dressed, dripping with water, and still covered in gore. My own and the crows'.

"Explosion," I said by way of explanation.

The word didn't even phase them. Nor did the feathers or blood. They helped me rinse my hair again. Rung out my jacket and held my shoes under the automatic hand dryer.

One of them had a packet of bandage strips and patched up some of the cuts on my cheeks and forehead.

The other had prescription-strength ibuprofen and gave me two pills and a drink from her silver hip flask saying, "You need this way more than me, honey."

They brushed my hair and pulled it back in a ponytail with a band also pulled from one of their purses. These women were prepared for anything.

"I have to get back to the firemen," I said finally, which was sort of true.

They walked me to the gate, wanting to make sure I got out okay.

Telling them I had someone waiting outside, I thanked them sincerely. With good-bye waves, the two cheerfully made their way back to the building, arm in arm, their flouncy dresses swaying.

The guard then decided he must take up the banner of my protection. Hooking a protective arm around my waist, he slowly walked with me until I found Alistair.

The guard was not pleased with my companion. He shook a finger at him saying severely, "You, sir, are not a gentleman."

Alistair's eyebrows popped up.

"How could you let a lady wander off on her own in this condition. She could be in shock. You take care of her!"

With a final paternal pat on my shoulder and a two-fingered 'I am watching you' gesture at Alistair, he was gone.

Alastair looked at me, shook his head, and turned back to the smoldering wrecks. He didn't see the tears rolling down my stinging cheeks for the kindness of strangers.

I leaned against the nearest car but had to quickly readjust my position. The hot metal burned through my wet clothes.

Graves was back, sniffing energetically as he paced this way and that. He still had his seeing-eye harness on.

"Any theories on who blew up Raoul?" I asked when Alistair didn't offer any information.

"We're not sure if he was blown up. Graves is trying to sniff out Raoul's scent."

"How can he tell? I would think everything just smells like barbecued automobiles. Not that I care if Raoul got blown up or not."

Alistair shrugged and kept watching. We were some distance away from the fire engines and the police for obvious reasons. There would be questions and perhaps someone might remember a giant

seeing-eye wolf dragging a frantic yet strangely well-coordinated blind woman through a gauntlet of horses and handlers.

We moved a couple of more rows away as more police crowded the scene.

Alistair pointed out a sleek silver Audi sedan that gate security waved through.

“Veronique,” he said.

She pulled into a nearby handicap parking spot and walked over.

I didn’t think she looked particularly upset over the fiery loss of her partner or handicapped for that matter. Her strong-featured face was impassive. In fact, she looked more annoyed than anything else as she tucked a curl of her shoulder-length hair — black with artful gray streaks — behind one ear. She crossed her arms and stared at the wreck.

Veronique was in her mid-fifties, I guessed. Dark skinned, maybe East Indian ethnicity. Tall, regal looking. Great figure in a green sleeveless pencil dress and statement pearls. Woman executive, Fortune 500 stuff. She looked like the kind of boss where her staff had to wear panty liners to keep from wetting themselves every time she called their name — even the men.

Veronique didn’t introduce herself to me. No warm handshake or ‘Welcome to the Undead Club’ greeting. Her eyes passed right over my bedraggled self, registering no emotion.

The police and firemen clustered around the blackened wrecks covered in oozing white foam.

“Have they found a body?” I asked.

She looked at me then, narrowing her eyes and tilting her head. “You’re a new spirit.” She wasn’t asking. “Didn’t you pay attention in processing?”

“Ruckus,” supplied Alistair by way of explanation.

Her eyes narrowed more.

“There will be no body.” Her voice was crisp, her words terse. “Our bodies are simulacra. When we meet the true death, they just disappear.”

“Wait, wait, wait. What?” I stammered.

‘Poof,’ mouthed Alistair with a hand motion.

Running through the dictionary of my soupy brain, I came up with simulation, similar, sympathy, simpatico. No simulacra.

Grabbing my phone, I googled.

Oh.

She was saying we were body copies of our formerly living selves. *Hmmm*. What did I think about that? I was here. A version of me at the very least. I was breathing and I could state unequivocally I liked breathing. No freaking out necessary, I decided and tuned back in.

She was asking Alistair what we were doing here.

He gave her an edited version of the demons and dead horses situation. Nothing about Raoul's mad dash or him conjuring a flock of murderous crows.

"We were walking to the stables in case we'd missed anything when we saw Raoul."

'Oh, oh, oh,' I thought. Lies! Seems I wasn't the only one feeling more and more comfortable with the uptown team being on the take.

"Who would want to remove Raoul?" Alistair asked, sounding all innocent and confused.

Veronique took a deep breath as though she was going to answer then expelled it quietly. Shifting her shoulders, she silently turned away from Alistair to stare at the clean-up crew.

If they were dirty, so was Philippa.

To be continued…