

# **Dance Into the Dark: A Living in the Shadows Novel**

By August Westman

Smashwords Edition

Copyright 2012 August Westman

## **Smashwords Edition, License Notes**

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be reproduced, copied, redistributed, re-sold or given away to other people for commercial or non-commercial purposes. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<a href="#"><u>PROLOGUE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER ONE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER TWO</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER THREE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER FOUR</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER FIVE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER SIX</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER SEVEN</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER EIGHT</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER NINE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER TEN</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER ELEVEN</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER TWELVE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER THIRTEEN</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER FOURTEEN</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER FIFTEEN</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER SIXTEEN</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER SEVENTEEN</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER EIGHTEEN</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER NINETEEN</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER TWENTY</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>CHAPTER TWENTY ONE</u></a>
<a href="#"><u>EPILOGUE</u></a>

## PROLOGUE

It is interesting to note that, as historians and archeologists discover art and writings from ancient civilizations, there are certain patterns that show up in each civilization's mythology.

For example: Chinese, Europeans, and ancient central and south Americans all have art depicting large, winged lizards, most of which could breathe fire. While it is possible that the idea of these creatures were shared between the Chinese and Europeans, there is no historical evidence suggesting that they had done so. Besides that, it is near impossible that they could have shared this idea with, say, the Aztecs, as exploration into the new world didn't happen until centuries after the first carvings of the *Quetzalcoatl*. Each culture portrayed these beings differently, ranging in size, shape, and purpose, but the defining physical traits are still, undeniably and bizarrely, too similar to be a coincidence.

While there are some modern theories for this phenomenon, and no physical evidence suggesting that they existed, it still raises the question: is it possible that dragons were real?

Another example: every civilization in the Common Era has at one point in their history sustained superstitions that, either through ritual or through improper burial, a corpse can rise from the dead and take the life force of living humans to gain great power.

Each culture had their own name for these monsters, but as time has progressed society has been satisfied to call them the same thing.

Vampires.

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER ONE

My family was used to moving – when I was in fourth grade my family had moved three times over the course of the year. I could always tell when we were going to move, too. Mom and dad started talking less and less at dinner, but stayed up late at night talking in the office once they thought my siblings and I had fallen asleep. (Well, we assumed they were talking. The lights were on in the room, but we could never hear their voices, even with our ears jammed up against the crack underneath the door.) Within a couple of weeks we were packing up and getting ready to move. As soon as we had settled in to a new city, the change in my parents was instant: dinner would be cheerful again, my parents would be getting a full eight hours of sleep at night, and life would continue on as it had before. Even though the schools and friends and neighbors were different, we always moved in to a large or densely populated city, mom got a job at a university teaching medieval literature, and dad set up a shop as a carpenter making custom furniture. We've lived in New York, Chicago, Miami, San Antonio, Portland, Baltimore, Atlanta, and even Toronto, just to name a few.

When I was twelve we moved to San Francisco. I instantly fell in love with the city; the art, the music, the wide variety of people I met, even the crazy way all the apartments were painted. There was nothing I didn't love about the city, and it seemed to me my parents felt the same

way. We stayed there for years. I don't know what was special about San Francisco, but my parents showed no signs of wanting to leave.

Until a couple of weeks into my junior year of high school. All of the sudden they announced they had found a charming two-story house in a town called Stevens Ridge, Colorado, and that we were moving within two weeks. I was shocked. First of all, they didn't appear worried or stressed before deciding this at all, and secondly, we had never before lived in any city for longer than a year until settling down in San Francisco. After the second year of living in the City by the Bay I assumed that we had finally found a place to stay for good.

I couldn't figure out why they moved us so suddenly. I knew they liked San Francisco – they were these pseudo-modern hippies that believed in natural wellness and yoga and maintaining balance in one's life, and the city practically *oozed* that sort of attitude and then some. All they said was that there were good job opportunities for them in Colorado, though I think that's a load of crap because Mom got a job working at a college finding old or unique books for their library and dad found a place to open his own carpentry shop, which is pretty much *exactly what they were doing before the move*.

I was, admittedly, a bit resentful of the fact that we had to move from a place I loved so much. Not only that, but we were moving into a city that had just a fraction of the population of San Francisco, making it the smallest place that we'd ever lived in.

I was terrified of having to adjust to a small town. Making friends was easy in big cities – everyone in my school lived fairly close together, and each school was big enough to have plenty of people to meet and make friends with. I had nightmarish visions of the having to wake up at four in the morning so I could catch the bus that took all the kids (*all* the kids - elementary, middle school, and high schoolers alike) within a 50 mile radius to my new school, which would be filled with nothing but extreme-right wing cowboys. I was willing to bet there was no gymnastics team, either at the school or the rec center (would there even be a city rec center?), which meant I could kiss my favorite sport goodbye. Was there going to be anything to *do* in this little podunk town?

It took several days to drive from San Francisco to Colorado. We reached Stevens Ridge in the early afternoon on a Tuesday, and as we pulled into the city limits I felt a little embarrassed at how judgmental I had been. Just because Stevens Ridge was smaller than any of the larger cities we had lived in didn't mean that it was automatically a small town. As we got off the interstate I saw a movie theater and a big box retailer as well as several of the standard fast food joints. We drove through the center of the city to get to our house, and I saw several interesting places that I was already planning on checking out, including a used book store, a custom costume shop, an exotic pet store, and a few charming-looking cafes. It was obvious there weren't any stadiums or arenas for sporting events or concerts, but we were only about an hour away from Denver, so if any interesting bands came through I wouldn't be completely cut off from the cultural world. As I thought about all this I reminded myself that sixty thousand people was still a lot for a town and I certainly wasn't going to get to know everyone in any short time. It was a small comfort, but I was still uncomfortable with how far out everything was spaced and the sense of emptiness it had compared to big cities.

Our new house was about ten minutes away from the interstate. It was in a neighborhood with houses built farmhouse style, with big porches and at least two levels. I was in awe as we pulled up to our new home - we had never lived in a house that was so *big*. In fact, having lived in so many large cities we mostly lived in apartments or condos. I suppose that because of that fact I never realized how much money my parents actually made between the two of them. I

would never have assumed that they made enough to afford the two story farm house with both a back and a front yard that we were pulling in to.

It was exactly the kind of house that's portrayed in the stereotypical American dream; two stories, painted a light navy blue with an off-white roof, white shutters, and a wooden porch large enough to hold a couple of chairs or a swinging bench as well as a couple of bikes. There was even a waist-high white picket fence around the front yard, and I caught a glance of a taller wooden fence blocking off the back yard. Flowers lined both the paved walkway to the front yard and the driveway to the attached garage. We actually had a *garage*. We had *never* had a garage before! To complete the picture there were a couple of aspen trees in the front yard, and I could see the top of a large oak tree in the back yard.

I hated it.

I was willing to try to accept everything else about Steven's Ridge and the adjustments we'd have to make to living in a smaller town, but this just felt so... normal. Average. Which my family was most decidedly not. We weren't the type to live the stereotypical American dream. While I had hoped that we would eventually settle down, I had imagined it would be in a place more like San Francisco, where my family could be the modern hippies that we had always lived as and not stick out like a sore thumb. On the outside we seemed normal, but I was positive that the suburbanites would mark us as outcasts once they heard my parents' notions on religion and politics. I'm sure our vegetarianism alone would probably freak them out. This just wasn't our natural environment.

I was nervously rubbing the beads on my necklace as my Dad put the moving truck in park. It was a habit I had when I was in uncertain situations - my necklace was normally tucked into my shirt, but I pulled it out every once in a while when I was feeling anxious. I'd twist the chain around my fingers, rub each of the beads in a specific order, and even bite on the silver charm if I was by myself.

"Well, here we are! What a place, eh? Let's look around the house and choose out our rooms before unloading everything," my dad said cheerfully. I hopped out of the cab and looked at my younger brother and older sister as they got out of one of our cars, which my mom had been driving. (The other car was hitched to the back of the truck to save on gas, even though both Terra and I had our licenses.) Arvin was always hard to read anyway, so I couldn't tell if he was either complacent or apathetic. Terra looked thrilled - I'm sure that this place was exactly the kind of place she had always dreamed of living in. She always hated moving the most out of all of us kids, and this was exactly the kind of place that screamed, "live here forever!" I wished that my oldest brother, Ammon, was with us. He and I were a lot alike and he would probably share my hatred of this place with me.

We opened the door and filed into the entryway one by one. From the front door we could see a living room, a study or music room shut off by glass French doors, a hallway leading to another large room - probably the kitchen or dining room - and directly in front of us was a staircase leading to the second storey.

I followed Arvin and Terra up the stairs while mom and dad stayed on the main level to check it out - the master bedroom and bathroom was to the left, while to the right there was a hallway where the rest of the bedrooms and the shared bathroom was.

"I call this one!" I heard Terra's voice say from inside the one of the bedrooms as I exited the master bedroom. I followed her in and looked around. It was pretty bland, really - just an average-sized room with an average-sized window and closet. The view wasn't even all that

great, since it was facing the front of the house. I checked out the bedroom next to it, in which Arvin had laid down on the floor and staring up at the ceiling.

"I call this one," he said.

Whatever. I had never really cared much about picking rooms in our previous apartments, and was actually pretty excited about having my own room. Normally Terra and I had to share one, so any room of my own was going to be a good thing.

Well, that's what I thought until I went into what was going to have to be my bedroom. It was, in every architectural sense, a better room. The window was wider and let in more light, and the room had a door going directly into the bathroom since I was right next to it. It was the view that really killed it.

It looked directly into our backyard, which was large enough to have the oak tree and still enough room to look out beyond that. Past our fence was a roughly-paved access road, and after that was a graveyard.

"Can I trade one of you guys?!" I shouted out my door.

"No!" Came the simultaneous reply from the other two bedrooms. "You snooze, you lose!" Great. I got a room with the most magnificently morbid view. Mom and dad didn't even have to worry about it since the oak tree was blocking the view out their window.

I suppose that there wasn't anything inherently wrong with that view. In fact as far as cemeteries went it was a rather lovely one, with a couple of small mausoleums, a few shade trees and some marble statues in it. It was just bizarre that it was right behind our house and it gave me the creeps. Now I'd know any time someone in the town died, which was just depressing. At least I'd be the first to know if there was a zombie uprising, I tried to joke to myself.

Mom and Dad had caught up with us and entered my room. "Well, that's quite the view!" my dad commented and patted my shoulder.

"Yeah. It's... cheery," I replied hollowly.

"Don't think too much about it. When your dad and I were newly married and Ammon was just a baby we lived next to a graveyard. It was nice, actually, because the house was cheaper and the neighborhood was quieter," mom told me encouragingly.

"Super." I trudged out the door and went downstairs to see what was there.

The back of the house was pretty open, with the kitchen and dining room taking up most of the space. There were a bunch of windows, letting in a lot of light, and thanks to the fence around the backyard there wasn't a view of the graveyard at all.

I opened the sliding glass door to the backyard and stepped down onto the small paved area, taking a look around at what we had. Again, it was absolutely perfect for living the ideal suburban life - a paved area just large enough to have a barbeque grill and picnic table, and a grassy area just large enough to set up a variety of outdoor activities. The previous tenants had even tied a rope swing onto a branch of the tree. It was disgustingly normal and I felt like gagging.

I heard Dad call to us to go out front so we could help unload the truck. It was the middle of the day and with most people still at work or school no one noticed us moving in, but that was fine. We had loads of experience moving our own stuff, and since we didn't have anything ridiculously heavy like a piano, we made quick work of it.

We were done unloading the truck by six, and went to a Mexican restaurant we had passed on Center Street for dinner. I was surprised at how good it was, considering it was in the middle of the Rockies, and had to chastise myself for again assuming everything would be bland. Once we got home we built our bed frames, made our beds and set up what we'd need for the evening

and next day, like the bathrooms and some of the kitchen. Mom went grocery shopping for some food essentials, and by the time we had gotten to a comfortable point it was already nine thirty, which was late enough for a family who had spent the last week packing up their lives, driving halfway across the country, and unpacking most of their belongings. I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

The next day was solely devoted to unpacking and setting everything up; the goal was to have no cardboard boxes just sitting around by dinner time. Mom and dad went out to set up at their jobs and enroll Arvin at the middle school and myself at the High School, while us kids unpacked and organized everything.

The whole process is frightfully dull, I'm afraid, since we had everything down to a pretty solid routine. Nothing was lost or broken, and after my siblings and I had unpacked and set up everything in our rooms we teamed up to set up the living room and kitchen. The only thing that my parents didn't want us to touch was the workroom equipment, which was left in the unfinished apartment above the garage. Dad was very particular about his carving tools and Mom had some pretty fragile reference books, so they wanted to handle those things themselves.

I decided that my bedroom wasn't all that bad when I went to bed that night. Actually, it was really nice, as long as I ignored what was right outside. I left the curtains open so the cracked window would let in a breeze. The moon was halfway visible from where I lay, and lit my room with a soft glow. I wouldn't say it was quiet outside – there was the occasional car that drove by, crickets chirping, breeze rustling the leaves. You know, all the natural stuff you expect to hear at night, but it was peaceful.

I was just about to fall asleep when the noises stopped. Now, I'm not the most observant of people and probably wouldn't have noticed if it were, say, simply that the crickets stopped chirping. But this particular quiet was so very complete and... *intense*. Like when you're taking an important test and everyone is quiet, but you can feel the tension in the air. My room no longer felt peaceful at all. I tried pulling the blankets over my head, hoping that the silence I made in my little cave would cover the silence in my room and I could go to sleep, but it didn't work. I was suddenly very awake.

I got out of bed quickly, hoping that sleeping on the living room couch tonight would be better. As I started towards the door I glanced out of my window and froze. There were people in the cemetery, and from what I could tell they were definitely not there for a late night visit to a family member.

I stood at my window and watched in fascination. There were three figures total, fighting each other. One of them was a male, though I couldn't make out the age. It wasn't that he was too far away; it was just that at one angle he looked like he could be in his late twenties, and the next he looked like he was my age. Other than that, there wasn't anything unusual about him, except maybe his sense of style. It looked like he had dyed streaks in his hair, though in the dark I couldn't tell what color. He had a long black trench coat on over a plain shirt and dark jeans. The trench coat seemed warm for the weather, but I suppose if you wanted to sneak around in the dark it would be appropriate.

The other two looked... unusual. They were also male, and definitely looked middle aged, but something about them struck me as not quite right. Their movements were weird – one moment they were running after the young man in a way that looked like they were constantly stumbling in shoes that were too big for their feet, but once they got close enough to the other guy they struck out in a quick, fluid way that suggested they were not entirely that clumsy.

They also looked... unhealthy. Their skin was very pale, and their hair was all tangled up and knotted. Their clothes were dirty and torn in some places.

One of them turned to face my direction completely and I had to bite down hard on my knuckles to keep from screaming. He was missing the skin and eye from the right side of his face. It didn't look recent, either – there were splotches on his face that looked like blood, but it didn't shine in the moonlight like a fresh wound would.

I watched in horror as the two older men fought against the younger man. The younger man sprinted towards a mausoleum, running behind it and out of my sight. He was just fast enough that it took a few seconds for the older men to catch up. They went around the same side he did, but by the time they reached the mausoleum the younger man was sneaking around the other side to circle up behind them. I watched as he reached into his jacket and pulled out two long items. As he situated one in each hand I could make out that one was a knife and the other... well, it just looked like a pointy stick. He paused a moment, listening for the other two. I don't know what he was listening for, but he must have heard it because he suddenly ran around to the back of the mausoleum where the other two were, ready to attack them.

They were all out of sight at this point, but I heard a sound that possibly came from a human, though it sounded terrible. It was low, guttural, and came from a voice that was seemed to be only partly functional. I saw the younger man fly back and slam into a grave stone. It looked like he slammed into it pretty hard, but he was standing up again by the time the two monsters caught up with him again. (Monster is a good word, right? I didn't want to believe that monsters existed, but from what I could tell there wasn't really a more appropriate word.) I watched as he slashed into them with the knife. Every slash he made into their skin made a sizzling sound and smoke come from the wound, but it didn't slow the monsters down at all.

Finally the young man got a good chance to strike at one of the monsters – right into the throat with the knife. But here was the worst part – the monster didn't fall at all. It was obviously distracted, what with the fact that the knife was, somehow, burning its flesh, but all it did was stumble back and grapple with the knife to try and get it out.

This distracted the other monster just long enough for the guy in black to take the pointed stick and shove it up into its ribcage. That, at least, caused the monster to stop entirely. It collapsed on the ground, and – I kid you not – started decomposing. One minute there was a humanoid pile of flesh, and within fifteen seconds there was a pile of a few bones and clothes.

I was so fascinated by this that I almost missed the younger man kill off the other monster. He yanked the knife out of the monster's throat, kicked the monster down to the ground, and then in two very firm, quick strikes completely decapitated the monster. It started decomposing exactly like the other one did.

Once the young man seemed satisfied that the pile of bones was going to stay down, he went to go retrieve his stick from the pile of bones from the first monster. As he straightened from picking it up, he glanced up towards me, and did a double take. He was staring right at me, and I was frozen in place. What was I supposed to do? Wave? Shout out, 'Nice job, you got 'em good!?' His eyes narrowed as he kept staring. I couldn't take it anymore and just fell to the floor, out of his sight. I breathed as slowly and silently as I could, paranoid that, even from his distance, he could hear the smallest of noises.

I don't know how much time passed, but eventually nighttime noises started up again. I could see my curtains gently moving from the breeze; hear the leaves rustling, and the crickets chirping. I could even hear something disturbing the pond in our neighbors' back yard, and the

sound of moving water helped me relax enough to help me fall asleep, right where I was on the floor.



My alarm went off at six 'o'clock and I found myself crawling on the floor to reach my bed table to turn it off. I stayed sitting on the floor and leaned against the bed, rubbing my face while trying to figure everything out. I knew what I saw last night. It was too vivid to be a dream, and I had woken up on the floor right where I had let myself fall. I got up and slowly walked to my window, unsure and somewhat frightened of what I would see.

Of course the piles of bones weren't there. Though I hoped that maybe it was because I did, in fact, have a nightmare, I knew that the more likely reason was that the man in black had cleared them away. After all, piles of bones left out in the open always look suspicious, even in a graveyard.

I decided to not think about it while I was getting ready for the day. Though it had been a few years since we had made a move, I still remembered the drill. First day, move in. Second day, unpack and organize. Third day, school. My parents were very keen on making sure that we didn't lose too much schooling or allow our daily schedules to get interrupted too much, so by the time I had finished getting ready the rest of my family was already in the kitchen eating breakfast.

"Looks like someone nearly forgot to get up this morning!" My dad said with a wink as I sat down with my bowl of cereal.

I forced a smile and small laugh. I knew he was kidding around, trying to tease me for "forgetting" the moving-in process that was practically ritual at this point. Any other day I would have genuinely joked around with him, but I was too distracted and upset by what I had witnessed the night before to put my heart into it.

Obviously I wasn't hiding it too well. Terra nudged me as she stood up to take her dishes to the sink and asked, "What's your deal? You look like you didn't get any sleep at all."

I shrugged. "I fell off the bed last night. Didn't bother to get up and now I'm sore from sleeping on the ground. I'll be fine once I start moving around and stuff."

"You slept on the floor? Whatever floats your boat, I guess. Anyway, all my stuff is ready to go, so I'll take off now to see if the community college has classes worth signing up for. See you all tonight!" With that Terra waved to all of us and was out the door.

Terra was an odd one. Whereas Ammon couldn't wait to move out of the house as soon as he graduated high school, Terra was over a full year out of high school and had no interest in leaving the household. She signed up for classes at the nearest community college once she graduated, not because she wanted to but more because she felt she had a responsibility to do so. She had originally looked for as many online classes as she could, but my parents knew that if it were up to her she wouldn't leave the house at all, so they strongly suggested that she actually go to school and interact with people. She dealt with change so poorly that she almost didn't move with us from San Francisco when mom and dad announced the move - the only deciding factor in whether or not she stay or go with us to Colorado was finding out how expensive an apartment in the Golden City was, even when splitting the cost with roommates.

As mentioned, Ammon was a completely different story. He was applying for colleges at the beginning of his junior year, and had been accepted to a couple by the time he graduated. He had decided by then that college wasn't for him, though, and instead packed up his camera,



packed a backpack and told our parents that he would keep in touch. I'm not sure where he went or where he is now, but we get a photo in the mail from him about twice a month with a note on the back saying where he's been and what project he's currently working on, and he makes an effort to spend a few days with us at major holidays, so my parents don't worry too much. I think they were kind of expecting him to wander around for most of his life, to be completely honest. He was the kind of kid that wanted to hang out every afternoon with his friends after school, but never to play video games or basketball or something like that. No, he was always wandering around the city, trying to go on an "adventure" and usually ended up finding somewhere new and getting in trouble. The worst punishment my parents could inflict on him when he broke the house rules or curfew was taking away his bus pass.

Arvin didn't say anything at all at breakfast. He finished his food, put away his dishes, and left. He doesn't talk much, but has this really intense look on his face all the time, as though he's trying to solve some of mankind's biggest problems, like global warming or something crazy like that. I pointed this out to him once, and asked what was on his mind all the time. He replied, "I don't think of the same thing all the time. There's something new to think about every day, and I just like to think about it until I have it all figured out." When I tried asking him what he thought about and what he was trying to figure out, he shrugged and said, "Anything and everything, I guess." I didn't get anything else out of him, but he gets the best grades in school out of all of us, so I guess it works for him. Whatever "it" is.

Mom and dad never left the kitchen before me or my siblings did, so soon it was just the three of us. It was pretty quiet as I was eating and mom and dad were cleaning up their dishes, but they weren't talking, either, which made me a little uncomfortable.

"Did you guys hear anything last night? Maybe out in the cemetery?" I asked suddenly.

They glanced at each other, though it was too quick for me to decide what look they had on their faces. Concern, maybe, or surprise. Whatever it was, it wasn't good. "What do you mean? Like a stray dog or something?" my mother asked.

"No, more like... well, never mind. If you didn't hear it, it was probably just a bad dream. Thanks for breakfast, mom. What's the name of my school?"

"Alpine High. I have directions for you if you want to ride your bike, but there's a bus stop a couple blocks away if you'd rather not."

I glanced at the directions Mom had printed off for me. The website estimated the total distance to be two and a half miles. "Thanks, but it's warm enough that I'll ride my bike. "

I loved riding my bike. I knew that at sixteen years old I should be anxious to get a car, but my parents told me that no teenager needs a car of their own. I had my license so I could borrow one of the family cars if needed, but if I wanted a car of my own it was up to me. I was okay with borrowing, and most of the money I earned was going in to a savings account for college. Besides, I was in to the whole living green thing and felt that if my destination was under a mile away I could walk, and if it was less than ten miles away I could bike. I got all my stuff together quickly and took off, hoping that my late start wouldn't affect how many classes I would have to miss that day.

[\*Back to top\*](#)

## CHAPTER TWO

Alpine High School was a fairly unremarkable, large, two-story brick building with a decently sized football field, though the baseball and soccer field didn't even have bleachers next to them. I wasn't sure if it was because sports just weren't that big here, or if football was more important to these people than any other sport. The parking lot was fairly large and had filled most of the way, which told me that most of the students came from rich families.

Since my parents had already stopped by the high school and junior high the day before to sign all the paperwork required to enroll Arvin and myself, all we had to do was see the councilor about what classes we could sign up for and we'd be set. Unfortunately once I found the councilor's office I realized I was going to be there for a while. Though I had arrived twenty minutes before the first class began, the school district started the school year later here than the one in San Francisco and Alpine High had only been having classes for a week, so the cutoff date for dropping and signing up for classes hadn't passed yet. The office was filled with students waiting to make their case as to why they need to drop from algebra honors to regular algebra, or how their physical education class should be waived this year due to some club or sport they were in last year or other nonsense like that.

The bell rang and the secretary announced to everyone in the waiting area that they had to go to class. I got up off the chair I was waiting in and stood at the counter, trying to catch the secretary's attention. She shot me an annoyed look and said, "Everyone needs to go to class. No exceptions, no excuses. You can come in during lunch to try and change your classes."

Wow. Touchy, much? "Sorry, it's just that I don't have a class to go to. My family just moved here and I need to sign up for classes."

She looked at me suspiciously. "Do you have a parent with you? I need a parent or guardian signature for some of the paperwork before we can get you enrolled."

"They already came in yesterday and took care of all that. I just need to sign up for classes."

"And your parents don't care what classes you take? They're just going to let you sign up for whatever?"

"They believe in self-reliance. Responsibility. All that stuff. If I sign up for classes I don't like or that are too hard or too easy, it's my problem to take care of."

She gave an approving nod and asked for my name to look up what had already been filed. Since my parents had done this so many times, they hadn't missed anything. She let the councilor I needed to meet with know I was there and within a few minutes I was sitting in his office. It took a little bit of time to figure out how to fit all the classes I wanted together, but in the end I only had one class I was a little dissatisfied with, and even then it was only a semester-long class.

The bell alerting the end of first period rang as I was signing some papers back at the secretary's desk while she printed off my official schedule and got a map of the school for me. I signed the last paper and my gaze wandered over to the hallway. The front walls to the offices were mostly panes of thick glass, leaving an unobstructed view of the students shuffling from one class to the next. I wasn't looking for anyone, not really, but when someone walks by with grey and white streaks against black hair it's kind of hard to miss.

I couldn't believe it. Not only was he – the guy I had seen the night before – real, but he was in *high school*. *My* high school. He was dressed in a hooded sweatshirt and jeans and carried a navy blue backpack. He looked completely normal, hairstyle aside. I never would have guessed that he was fighting monsters the night before had I not seen it myself.

He had noticed me staring at him, by the way. It was odd – it was as though he could feel me looking at him as he walked by, because he stopped walking abruptly and looked straight at

me. The look on his face went from shock, to concern, to anger. He narrowed his eyes at me, much like he did the night before, then turned around and disappeared into the crowd of teens.

“Here’s your map and class list, if you hurry up you’ll be to class on time. It’s on the second level, halfway down the first hallway on the right.” The secretary shooed me out of the offices and I wandered to my second period class. I took my time getting there, hoping to catch a glimpse of the boy again. I wasn’t sure as to what end I was working toward... if I had a chance to talk to him, what would I say? If I couldn’t think of anything to say, should I just pretend that he didn’t exist? No, that would drive me crazy, not getting answers about what I had seen. So how do I start that particular conversation? “Hey, so I was just wondering – what were those monsters you killed and how’d you learn to fight them? You know, for future reference. In case I run into whatever those were, seeing as how they apparently visit my backyard.”

I got to my class just barely on time. I found my way easily enough, but I took the extra minute I had to wander the hall to find the black and white-haired boy. I got a lot of stares as I rushed through the hallways and peered into classrooms – I was pretty hard to miss to begin with, with my long, dark auburn hair that flared bright red when the light hit it at a certain angle, but I’m sure I looked downright crazy with my almost-running through the halls and sticking my head into each classroom as I went. It was the same deal with my next two classes; I came in right before the starting bell rang and chose a seat next to the door so I could leave as soon as the dismissal bell rang. Sure, it seemed like a bad idea since the first day is ‘key’ to forging new friendships in a new school, especially since I caught more than one curious glance as I sat down, but I found that the people who stuck with you were the ones that waited a few days to introduce themselves. Not the shy people, just the people that liked to get a feel for the kind of person you are first before jumping in and trying to force a friendship that may not work out. I did the same thing with everyone else. After the sixth move my family made after I started school I had figured that out for myself and stopped with the self-pitying attitude of ‘I need as many friends as possible to validate myself as a human being of worth’.

Discouraged that he was apparently nowhere to be found, I slowly walked to the lunch room after the fourth period dismissal bell rang. I dawdled, waiting for the lunchroom to calm down to find a table that hadn’t been called for. Only one week into the school year and I knew that all the groups of friends and cliques would claim their tables and corners of the lunch room. I almost couldn’t find an empty table - once the crowd had settled down there were only two empty ones, and even then one was quickly occupied by a girl who was probably saving the table for a bunch of her friends.

I sat down and started in on my lunch, when suddenly he was sitting across the table from me. I didn’t see him come over, sit down, anything. One minute I was chewing on my sandwich and zoning out and the next moment he was sitting in front of me, still inexplicably angry.

“What are you.” It wasn’t a question, not really. I wasn’t sure I heard it right, either. Did he ask who I was or did he actually say *what*? “You recognized me today. From last night. You shouldn’t have remembered last night. Humans wouldn’t have withstood the memory wipe. So again. What are you.” He was leaning very close to me and talking very quickly and quietly.

I swallowed and leaned close to him. I could play this game, if he wanted. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m a plain ol’ boring human. And if this is how our first conversation is going to go, I suppose I could ask you the same question. What are you, and what are the things you killed last night.”

He wasn’t too happy with that. “What’s your name.”

“Makenna Reyvens. I’d let you call me Kenna if I liked you. What’s your name.”

He never answered, instead standing up and looking down at me menacingly. I stared up at him with what I hoped was defiance or stubbornness.

“Watch your back. I’m not the only one that’ll take notice of what you can do.” With that, he turned around and left. I didn’t watch him leave. I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. I waited at least five minutes before even moving again. When I was sure he had to have left the lunchroom, I turned around to check for the all clear. I didn’t see him. I slumped down in my chair and started doing deep breathing exercises. I was shaking all over and needed to calm down before moving on. I had tried so hard to maintain a sense of being calm and cool while that guy was confronting me, but truth be told I was terrified of him because I knew he was capable of killing. I also managed to find room to be rather angry from how rude he was - I’m not used to people getting in my face like that, and I was already scared of him to begin with.

Lunch was already halfway over. I tried eating my sandwich quickly, suddenly starving from the little adrenaline rush I had experienced. I had just barely gotten another bite in when I noticed a couple of girls and a guy creeping towards my table. I swallowed and smiled.

“Hey, how’s it going?” I was still shaking a little, but I was able to feign cheerfulness well enough.

“Are you okay?” The shorter chick asked.

“Umm... yes... why wouldn’t I be?”

“It’s just that... Jack doesn’t talk to anybody. Ever. Well, he talks to some people, but it’s very rare and mostly he talks to the Goth freaks. Well, they come to him. He never approaches anyone himself. And I’ve never seen him look so angry, either. You looked pretty freaked out once he left. We just... wanna make sure that he didn’t hurt you or anything.”

Jack, huh? I was surprised that apparently I was "privileged" enough to be approached by this guy. I smiled and shrugged.

“Whatever. I think we live in the same neighborhood or something. He was just saying hi.”

“That was a very angry looking hello.”

“Well, I can handle myself when the situation calls for it. Thanks for your concern, though.” I smiled and hoped that I still didn’t look angry about that particular exchange. Apparently it worked, since the three sat down across from me.

The shorter chick introduced herself as Jennie, and the other two who hadn’t had a chance to talk yet finally spoke up and introduced themselves as Dani and Nate. I introduced myself and we seemed to get along pretty well, though I had my doubts since I did have my one-week rule of thumb for making friends. Through talking with them I found out that Jennie and Nate had the same class I did fifth period, and that Dani had sixth period with me.

“I should let you know, though, that Jack has sixth period with us, so be on your toes when you get there, ‘kay?” Dani warned. “I don’t know what his deal is, but I’m always weirded out by guys that don’t talk to anyone. You never know when they’re just gonna go nuts.”

“I doubt he’s going to suddenly snap one day,” replied Nate. “He just showed up in the middle of the year last year and hasn’t bothered to really do anything. I mean, he’s in all the honors and AP classes, so he’s super smart and does well on tests, but I’ve tried forming a study group with him and it really doesn’t work. I think he just wants to be left alone until he graduates and then leave as soon as possible. Heck, I wanna get out of here as soon as I graduate.” Jennie playfully hit him at that. He smiled and laughed. “What? Who grows up dreaming of living in Colorado?”

The bell rang and I followed Nate and Jennie to our next class, which was Chemistry. I sat behind Jennie and watched her and Nate flirt the whole class period. I didn't mind that they were ignoring me; I was pretty sure that they were just being nice and that they weren't really trying to make friends, but it was still nice to feel like I wasn't just trying to settle into any seat that was available.

When the fifth period dismissal bell rang I went straight to my last class, this time anxious to beat Jack there. I'm not sure what the purpose would be; maybe I felt that if I was already there I'd have the upper hand over... whatever was going on between us.

I didn't beat him there, but he wasn't in a position to interact with me anyway. He did glance at me as I walked into the classroom, but there was another girl already talking to him.

She looked like a slut, and for whatever reason it made me very angry.

She had long blonde hair that she let fall in her face, and it looked pretty greasy. Groomed, but greasy, like she hadn't washed it for days. She was wearing skinny black jeans, high heels, and a long-sleeved dark purple shirt with a corset-style bodice. The shirt was low-cut, but there was a sheer material that covered her chest up to her neck. There were rings on almost every single finger, and her nails were painted a dark purple to match her shirt. What really got to me was her makeup. It wasn't sloppily applied, but there was *so much* of it. Dark eye shadow, bold lipstick, and foundation applied so thick it could probably be peeled off to make a death mask.

It looked like she was flirting with Jack, but from his posture I could tell that he was only just barely putting up with it. As I continued to glance at the scene while I was finding my seat I realized there was something off about the way she was talking to him. While I couldn't tell what she was saying, it looked like she was flirting with him because she *knew* it bothered him. And he definitely didn't do anything to dissuade her. He just looked straight ahead with his jaw clenched and let her chat away.

So what about this scene made me so upset? My parents had always told us not to judge based off of appearances. Hey, I had even left some really good friends behind in San Francisco that had a more extreme sense of style. But then again, girls don't dress like that and attempt to maintain the "I'm so innocent and pure" personality.

As I glanced at her every few seconds I realized that it wasn't the way she was dressed that bothered me so much as it was the way she held herself. Like she knew that she was better than everyone else and wasn't afraid to act like it, and that she could dress the way she did and no one would bother her about the message it gave; that she could harass Jack – who originally gave me the impression that no one got the better of him – and he wouldn't say anything to stick up for himself. Though I wasn't fond of Jack, I was even less fond of this girl.

I sat down next to Dani and we talked until the bell rang. She was much more interested in getting to know me than Jennie and Nate were, and I was surprised to find myself interested in finding out more about her, too. She told me that there was no gymnastics team anywhere close to the town, but that she and a few other girls, most of whom had taken gymnastics as kids, had formed a modern dance club when she was a freshman and were always looking for more people to join them each year. It wasn't competitive, but it was pretty physically demanding, so they still got that buzz from pushing themselves to their limits. It sounded interesting, even though I had a hard time envisioning myself wearing a tutu, and gave a half-hearted promise that I'd check it out.

The rest of my day was pretty uninteresting. Jack had no apparent desire to confront me again, I wanted to go straight home to catch up on the classes I was behind on so I wasn't struggling for the rest of the school year, everyone was home on time for dinner – which was

pleasant – we watched the same movie we always watched to inaugurate the new house every time we moved, and I went to my room to read until I was tired enough to fall asleep.

I couldn't fall asleep, though. I had gone through the motions of the day, but my mind was somewhere else completely. I looked at my clock. It was midnight here, but it would be eleven p.m. in San Francisco. It was still pretty late, but I was positive that Daisy, my best friend before I left, would still be up. She was a night owl and I never knew her to even think of going to bed before midnight. She knew that once I left I would move on and make new friends, but she was really cool about it and let me know that she'd always be there for me to bother whenever I got bored. I pulled out my phone and texted her:

*Hey. The city hasn't set on fire since I left, has it?*

*She replied within a minute. Ha. No. It's gotten a lot more boring, though.*

*Pity. I could use some boring right now.*

*Ooh, that sounds ominous. What's going on?*

*You wouldn't believe me if I told you.*

*Try me!*

*I'll tell you later, once I figure out what's going on for myself. It's pretty freaky, though.*

*And I've only been here a couple days and someone already hates me.*

*You're lying. You can be pretty abrasive sometimes, but that's part of your charm. No one HATES you.*

*Well, apparently this one guy does. I'm not sure what to make of him. He freaked out at me and wouldn't even tell me his name when I asked him.*

*Why'd he freak out at you?*

*That's part of the weirdness that's going on.*

*You really aren't going to tell me?*

*Not now. Later, I promise. Sorry to bother you. I wanted to get things straightened out in my head and I can't even talk about it.*

*No prob. Is there anything I CAN help you out with?*

*I don't think so. Thanks anyway. 'Night.*

*Okay. Well, lemme know when you get everything sorted out. 'Night.*

I lay awake for another half hour, feeling my face getting red from embarrassment. Why did I think I could talk to anyone about this? No one would believe me. Still, Daisy was cool. Even if I couldn't talk to her about what happened, she'd probably have opinions about the subject. I got my phone out again.

*What would you do if you found out zombies existed?*

*That should be a fairly straightforward question without cluing in to my situation, right?*

This time it took five minutes for Daisy to respond.

*Did you move into a neighborhood infested with zombies? Is that the weirdness going on?*

*Yep! That's exactly it! How'd you guess?* I felt bad for making it sound like I was joking around, but I didn't want her to freak out. Or sound like I was a complete nutjob.

*Well, I'd have to say to make sure to keep a crowbar on you at all times. They're great melee weapons and are good tools to boot.*

*Lol. Thanks.* I tried to leave that pretty closed so she wouldn't respond. She told me everything that I needed to know – mainly that she didn't believe in monsters. That she wouldn't take me seriously when I brought up the topic.

I got out of bed and went to my desk. I pulled out a piece of origami paper and a felt tipped pen and started drawing on the non-patterned side. Whenever I had a lot on my mind I found

sketching designs helped me settle down. They were never anything specific – usually geometric shapes interlocking with each other with swirls or knotted patterned designs filling the empty spaces. I always drew on the back of origami paper so I could fold it up and string it to a line of other pieces I had done. I found comfort and balance in seeing my wild thoughts folded up in a crisp, complex design, and placed with my other wild thoughts. About once a year or so I took this string and burned it. It wasn't to symbolically get rid of these thoughts; it was actually to bind them together. To me the flames were not destructive, but instead brought unity to all these thoughts and the figures I assigned them to. After all, everything was reduced to ash by the time the flames burned out. There was never a designated time of year to do this, either. It was always at a time of year when I felt I had overcome a particularly difficult trial, or when I felt I was moving on and growing up. While my parents were pretty new age, this was a ritual I did all on my own.

It took three hours for me to finish this particular piece; two and a half hours to do the drawing and a half hour to fold it up. I needed to be especially careful with folding this one; not only did I crave crisp, clean lines, but I felt like folding a dragon, which was a more challenging fold.

As I hung it up, it stuck out from the other origami I had finished over the last few months. Normally I did something simple and real, like a crane or boat or flower. I rarely ever did mythological creatures, and the last time I did this particular dragon was the second time my family moved when I was in fourth grade. It was a particularly difficult time for me, mostly because I could tell my parents were especially distressed about something. When you're that age your parents still mean the world to you, so when they're worried it feels like the world is about to end.

I finally felt sleepy and turned off my desk lamp. I made the mistake of glancing out my window as I crossed my room to go to bed.

This time there were ghosts in the graveyard.

No, really – there were about half a dozen figures in the middle of the cemetery that were faintly glowing, were definitely not solid, but were definitely human looking. I crouched down so that only the top of my head would be visible, not wanting to get noticed again by more freaky beings.

They just... stood and talked. For about fifteen minutes I watched as they chatted and gesticulated at each other. From what I could make out, they weren't arguing, but they were definitely talking about something they were passionate about. They finished their conversation, smiled and shook hands with each other (a couple of them hugged), and disappeared. There was no trace of them being there, and as I waited, there was no sign of them coming back. I crawled in to bed, now completely mentally exhausted. I had just finished putting all my thoughts in order, come to terms with what I had witnessed the night before, and now this had to happen. I fell asleep quickly, giving up on trying to figure it out until I got more sleep.

The next morning unfolded much like the day before had. I hit my snooze button a couple of times, was late for breakfast, Dad and Terra made a big deal about it, and I was left alone with Mom and Dad again.

"Do you guys believe in ghosts?" I asked suddenly. This time they definitely gave each other a worried look.

"Have you been able to fall asleep, Kenna? Does the time change bother you?" Dad asked. "It could be that you'll need to take some melatonin before going to bed for a while."

“It’s only an hour difference, dad. I was just wondering what your personal feelings were concerning ghosts. Do you believe in them, or do you believe it’s a bunch of crap?”

He waved his hand, as though to make my question unimportant. “I believe that humans have souls, but what they want to do with them is their prerogative. Anyway, we’ll get your lunch ready for you if you want so you can get to school on time. It looks like you only ate half of what you packed yesterday anyway, so it’s no big deal.”

I made it to school on time, though just barely. To my pleasant surprise, Dani was in my first period class, so I had someone to sit with, which was comforting. I didn’t see Jack except for a glimpse of him at lunch and then during sixth period. He frequently shot me these bizarre, menacing glances during class, but disappeared as soon as the bell rang.

I had to admit, Stevens Ridge was definitely leaving its impression on me. Zombies, ghosts, and some maniac monster fighter that hated my guts for no apparent reason all in my first week. It was a shame that this impression wasn’t a good one.

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER THREE

A couple of weeks passed. The first few nights after seeing the ghosts I didn’t sleep very easily, but after about the fourth day I felt peace in my room again. I could fall asleep by ten like clockwork, and I was never stressed to make it to school on time. I didn’t see anything happen in the graveyard any more, though there were a couple of nights where all noises stopped and I was surrounded by that tense silence I felt on that second night, when I witnessed Jack killing those monsters. It was okay, though – even though I knew what was happening, I didn’t bother to get up, instead reaching out for that peacefulness that was now ever-present in my room. Eventually the silence would pass and I would fall asleep.

Just as I had predicted, I didn’t become very good friends with Nate and Jennie. They were the typical high school couple – obnoxious about the fact that they had a relationship when the majority of the student body didn’t, and always trying to dish out relationship advice to anyone that mentioned any interaction with a member of the opposite gender. Dani only hung out with them during her lunch because the school split lunch into two groups to keep the lunch crowd down, and all of her friends were on the second lunch schedule. Nate and Jennie were friends of friends, and, not wanting to feel like a loser with no one to eat lunch with, Dani chose to hang out with them.

I did become friends with Dani, though. She was an average height and pretty slender, with chestnut hair she kept at a short pixie cut. While she wasn’t extremely outspoken, she was extremely opinionated, which meant that she only had a few close friends instead of a lot of superficial friends like Jennie seemed to have. While I didn’t agree with her all the time, I got along with her well.

She kept pushing me into checking out the dance club, and I surprised myself when I finally agreed to sit in on a practice. Dancing wasn’t exactly my thing, and while their style had sounded interesting the way Dani described it, I still cringed at the mental picture of me in a frilly ballet outfit.

I was glad she pushed me into it, though. These girls - and even a couple of guys -*kicked ass*. They didn’t wear leotards and tights to practice, instead opting to wear whatever was comfortable for them – yoga pants and tank tops, gym shorts and tee shirts, or anything they



didn't mind getting sweaty in. Every practice started with twenty minutes of classical dance training – usually ballet or a cultural dance, though Dani told me that once in a while they bring in boyfriends and girlfriends for ballroom dancing, and once they even did tap dancing. After that was ten minutes of – I kid you not – kickboxing. While ten minutes was not a lot of time, they were really intense. The first time I joined in I was exhausted and ready to call it a day, whereas the rest of them were only barely breathing a bit harder than usual. I noticed how toned they all were after that and realized that these guys saw this more as an athletic club than an arts club. The last half hour to forty five minutes was devoted to their modern dancing. They split into two groups: one was devoted to a slower, more fluid form of dance; graceful, hypnotic, and mesmerizing, like ballet, while the other looked almost like a martial arts routine; intense, fast, and combative. They practiced on opposite sides of the studio, though twice a month they shared the routines they had come up with and tried to teach them to the opposite group. Since I was new they let me switch between the two whenever I felt until I decided which one to stick with.

While things were starting to fall into place, the fact that I was apparently the only person aware of the existence of monsters still bugged me.



On the Wednesday a couple of weeks after I had started school I was sitting at lunch with Dani and Nobuko, a girl whose family had moved to Colorado from Japan over the summer and who was still trying to deal with culture shock. She was the girl I had seen sitting by herself at lunch my first day at Alpine High, and when I realized that she always sat by herself I tentatively approached her. She spoke excellent English, though her accent got pretty heavy when she got flustered, which was often. She was in three of my classes, and from what I could tell she was really self-conscious and had a difficult time making friends. I saw a kindred spirit in her, because even though I worked hard to be outgoing and amicable, I still felt nervous and flustered inside when I met new people. That, and I was used to moving and knew what culture shock felt like.

Dani and I were talking with Nobuko about the cartoons she had watched when she was little, wondering if all Japanese cartoons were like the shows that made it to the states. We had a great time with it, laughing about how ridiculous some of the shows seemed to Dani and I compared to American Saturday morning cartoons, and Nobuko poked fun at Americans for how our shows were either completely surreal or incredibly dull.

It was a perfect segue into a question I had been dying to ask since I had seen the monsters and ghosts in the graveyard. The context of our conversation wasn't serious, but I doubted we would ever have any sort of conversation to lead me to ask this seriously.

"Man, could you imagine what our world would be like if stuff like that actually existed? You know, the supernatural and magic and whatnot?"

Dani giggled. "That would be so cool. I'm not afraid to admit it: when I was little I wanted to be a superhero so badly. You know, have a magical gem that turned me into a princess warrior or something like that."

I looked at Nobuko expectantly. She made a little movement with her head that was kind of a little half-bow and said, "A lot of Japanese people practice Shintoism, at least a little bit. Long ago we believed that there were spirits and demons everywhere, and though some beliefs have faded, there are still many, many shrines that people visit to honor the gods and spirits. My

grandparents gave me and my siblings charms to keep the demons away, too. They were very devout."

"But isn't that a religion? I'm talking about the supernatural. You know, zombies and ghosts and stuff."

"Yes, but all religions have an element of the supernatural to it. Do you believe in The Bible?" I shook my head, but Dani nodded emphatically. "Then you believe that a talking snake tempted Eve into eating a magical fruit, that an army of men could collapse a city from noise alone, that a group of young boys had power bestowed on them to resist fire so they wouldn't be burned to death, and that a man could have the power to banish demons from a human being. It is not so different from Shintoism, really."

"No, wait, I don't think you really understand—" Dani protested, but I quickly interrupted.

"Do you believe in Shintoism? You don't really talk about it like you do..."

"My grandparents were devout, but my parents were too busy with work to practice too much. I'm not sure how I feel about it. I haven't seen any proof of the existence of spirits or gods or demons, but I do not want to be disrespectful towards them if they are there. What do you believe in, Kenna, if you do not believe in the Bible?"

I shrugged. "My parents didn't really raise us to be religious. I once asked my dad why we didn't go to church, and he said, 'Just know that there is at least one greater being out there that has a hand in your life. Pray to them however you see fit, thanking them for the good in your life and being honest about the things that are not so good.' So I'm trying to figure things out for myself right now. Anyway, back to what you were saying... if, say, a dragon flew over our school right now, you'd be totally cool with it?"

Nobuko thought about it for a second, and then nodded. "I think I would believe it. It is said that sometimes spirits take the physical forms of dragons. How about you?"

"I think so, yeah."

"Well, you guys are crazy. God created every man and animal and he didn't create dragons. We'd have found evidence of them by now if they existed," Dani asserted. I quickly switched the topic, seeing that this was clearly going to be going in a bad direction.

"So have either of you been to that consignment store on center street? I want to go, but I'm afraid I'm going to spend all my money if I go in by myself. I'm a sucker for all the cool stuff people try to get rid of through consignment stores."

Dani shrugged. "I don't really like secondhand stores. They smell funny and only sell grandma clothes."

Nobuko looked interested, though. "I have not seen this store before. I would like to go with you, if that's okay."

"Is this afternoon okay?"

"Yes, that would work."

Dani didn't seem too happy, but then again, I was quickly finding out that there were few things that did make her happy.

Since it was a Wednesday it meant that there was an official dance practice, so I invited Nobuko to join us. She seemed really uneasy about it, but Dani (always excited to invite new people in) assured her that if she had gym clothes she could use those, and even if she didn't want to join in she was welcome to just watch. She decided to just watch, but afterwards she had so many questions about it, fascinated at how we could come up with dances with no predetermined moves. She didn't say yes or no to joining the club, but I was going to be surprised if she didn't end up as part of the team.

Nobuko had her own car, so I left my bike at school and we just went straight to the consignment store.

“Does Dani not like me?” She asked worriedly as we browsed the awful blouses with loud, seventies-style floral prints.

“From what I can tell she has a difficult time with new ideas. I’ve said a few things that got her pretty upset, but she’s usually resilient and lets it go quickly. I dunno. We haven’t known each other long, but she seems pretty cool,” I answered.

“Oh. Does she get upset often?”

I laughed. “Yeah, it seems that way, doesn’t it? Like I said, I’ve only been here for a couple of weeks, but she’s put up with me so far, so she’s pretty cool in my book.” I didn’t really want to talk about Dani, so I switched topics quickly. “So I’m, like, crazy interested in the Shinto religion. You said that your grandparents gave you charms to ward off demons. Did you actually keep them on you?”

Nobuko nodded and untied the bracelet she had on and handed it to me to look at. “I lost most of the charms they gave me when I was little, but this was the last one they gave me before they died. It is very precious to me and I wear it always.”

I studied it closely. It was an oblong metal piece with what I assumed were Japanese characters inscribed on it that had ribbon attached to both ends so it could be tied around the wrist or maybe even around the neck as a choker.

“What does it say?” I asked as I handed it back.

“I do not know exactly. It looks a little like someone was trying to write something along the lines of, ‘protect from evil and impure;’ but that is not how you actually write those words. I am not sure where my grandparents got it, but I think whoever etched those characters cared more about how it looked than what it actually says.”

“That’s too bad. It looks cool, though. Do you think it actually keeps demons away from you?”

She nodded and smiled. “I have not had any troubles with demons so far. But I keep it on me more as a keepsake than an actual charm.”

She was nice, but she said it in a way that suggested she didn’t want to talk about it any further.

“Kenna, why did you join the dance club? If you do not mind me asking, that is,” she asked after a couple of silent moments of browsing the jewelry.

“Honestly, I had no intention of joining at all. I’ve never been interested in dancing before. Really all that happened was that Dani wore me down and I finally said yes.”

“So you hadn’t done any dancing before? But you are so good!”

“I think I have gymnastics to thank for that. I had never really considered gymnastics and dancing super closely related before. I mean, I know a lot of people do, but for me gymnastics was a way for me to compete athletically against other gymnasts. Dance always seemed like a competition to judge a person’s creativity against other people’s creativity, which just doesn’t seem like an objective system of judgment to me. Just because someone sees the world differently than someone else doesn’t mean their way of expressing it is better or worse than someone else’s’ viewpoint. But I’m getting up on a soapbox here. The point is, these people are super athletic and have found a way to use that to express how they feel to anyone that cares to watch.” I gave Nobuko an encouraging smile. She asked me more questions about the dance club, and by the time we went to the register to purchase our items I had convinced her to actually join the club.

We went to go get ice cream afterwards and admire our purchases. Nobuko had gotten a couple of books and some vintage broaches that she pinned onto her backpack. I found a mini dress from the sixties or seventies that was just toned down enough that it would actually look good with some leggings and a jacket. I had also gotten a book, since Nobuko and I dared each other to buy and read a paperback romance novel. We spent the rest of the afternoon reading the first chapter of our books and reading some of the cheesiest lines out loud to each other, laughing at how predictable the writing from both of our books were.

When she dropped me off at my house afterwards I said, "I had loads of fun today. We should totally do this again sometime!"

Nobuko brightened up at that and said, "Yes! I had so much fun as well! Thank you so much!"

As she drove off I reflected at how content I was that life had already settled into a solid routine. I had a decent friendship with Dani and the potential for a very strong friendship with Nobuko. The dance club was a ton of fun, school wasn't that bad, and Jack hadn't spoken another word to me, which I was just fine with. While every time I saw him I was reminded about what went on just beyond my backyard, if he wasn't going to harass me I was going to try my best to stay out of his way and pretend that we had never met.

Until that next stupid, hateful, fateful Thursday afternoon.

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER FOUR

My sixth period class was World History. I had caught up to where the rest of the class was after a week and by the time the unit test arrived I was well prepared for what I needed to know. It was still a major test that weighed heavily on my grade, though, and the first major test I took at the new school, so I was nervous - nervous enough that I almost jumped out of my seat in surprise when Jack suddenly shot up from his desk and told the teacher that he had to leave, disturbing everyone from their intense concentration. The teacher told him he had to sit and finish his test, but Jack just grabbed his paper quickly, rushed up to the teachers desk, explained that it was already done and that it was really, really important that he leave. As he walked out the door he gave me one very significant look, then shut the door firmly behind him.

I was too disturbed by that look to finish the test well. I was two thirds of the way through it, so I knew that I was at least going to get a passing grade, but whether it was "A" material was up to dumb luck and fate. What was that look he gave me? Pity? Apology? Fear? It was certainly different than the anger he had previously looked at me with. I turned my incomplete paper in ten minutes after the bell rang. Mr. Moore was a generous teacher, letting me stay late with the (false) excuse I gave him that there was curriculum on the test I hadn't learned in my old school, but he was only willing to give me so much grace.

The dance club officially met on Mondays and Wednesdays, though the school was willing to turn a blind eye to the fact that they unofficially met on Tuesdays and Thursdays as well. The dance club didn't need any school funding beyond renting outfits for their twice-yearly performances (which the club raised most of the money for themselves through fundraisers anyway), and didn't need resources beyond a couple stereos and a place to practice (which was easy because a dance studio had been built in the gym area, and had once been used for a dance class that was offered as an alternative to gym) , so as long as we didn't stay more than an hour

and a half after the final bell rang, the school was fine with our extra practices. Even the adult supervision was pretty lax – it pretty much extended to the gym teacher unlocking the studio for us, then going back to her office to work on her paperwork and the occasional grading she had to do.

Since Thursdays weren't crucial to learning any routines, I took my time getting my stuff from my locker and going down to the bike rack, opting to go home instead. By the time I got there the busses had already left and the school felt pretty empty, which was unfortunate because no one else was around to be weirded out by the fact that Jack was standing at the bike rack, waiting for me.

I tried my best to ignore him, but he was standing right in front of the lock. Without looking directly at him I said, in the most polite way I could muster, "I would appreciate it if you could get your angsty butt away from my bike, thanks."

"Angsty?"

"Yeah. You're always dressing in dark clothes and you never talk to anyone and, until today, the only way you could address me or even look at me was with anger. You called me a *thing*."

"I did not call you a thing."

"You asked *what* I was, not *who* I was, which would lead me to assume that you see me as a thing, not a person."

"I apologize, that was not my intent. It was a 'what' as is 'what type of being would you classify yourself as', not 'what kind of thing are you'."

"That really doesn't help, as it still suggests that I'm not human. Which I am. You're still in front of my bike."

He stepped to the side, but was still close enough that he was hovering over me as I undid the lock. "I do want to formally apologize to you. For my past actions. You deserve a great deal of respect and I failed to show it to you. I would like to explain myself to you and make amends."

I stood up and looked straight into his eyes. He seemed to be genuine, but my temper was already fired up and I was not going to try to rein it in, not this time. I kicked him in the shin.

He jumped back a little bit and yelped in surprise, though he didn't appear to be hurt. "What was that for?"

"You make me angry. In fact, because of you I've been letting worry and fear build up for the last couple of weeks and I am sick and tired of it. Taking it out on you makes me feel better." I yanked my bike out of the rack and jumped on it, ready to take off as fast as I could.

I pedaled a couple of times, but he was already running to get in front of my bike to try and stop me. I tried to maneuver my way around him, but he caught the front of my handlebars to stop the bike. He underestimated how much power there already was behind the bicycle's movement, probably not expecting me to keep it set on the highest gear, and I lurched out of my seat. He caught me around my waist and pulled me towards him so I wouldn't fly over the handlebars. We fell to the ground and rolled a couple of times. He tried his hardest to shield me from the fall, so I was just fine, but if anything the fact that he successfully stopped me from leaving made me more pissed. I elbowed him hard in the ribs. He loosened his grasp on me and I jumped up as quickly as I could.

"You're a creep! It is SO not normal to treat people like this! You can't be angry, then apologetic, then... what, want to kidnap me? I will talk to you when I feel like talking to you! Which is probably never! Forget it! Leave me alone! I was just fine pretending that everything

was okay and that there were no such things as monsters! I wish I could give back what I saw, but I can't, and I'm sorry that you apparently can't make me forget. I'll just have to live with being angry at you for the rest of my life." I was talking pretty loudly at this point, but there was no one around to hear.

Jack was still on the ground, looking at me in mild shock. He only started to get up as I ran towards my bike and got ready to hop back on.

"They were vampires." He casually commented. Though I was already on my seat, I stopped. "Please, if you let me take you home, I'll explain what you saw and why I was so angry with you. Again, you didn't deserve it and I apologize."

I stood with both feet on the ground, though still straddling my bike. "If you are yanking my chain, I'm not afraid to make your life miserable." I warned.

"I believe it," he replied with a hint of amusement in his voice, "would you like to throw your bike in my car?"

"No." I was going to be defiant and pay him back for all the misery he had put me through. "You can walk me home. I need my bike, though, so you can carry it with you."

He looked at me oddly and agreed, "I will do it. How far away do you live? Are you sure you can walk all that way?"

"Two and a half miles. It's no big deal. The question is, can you carry my bike all that way, or are you going to wuss out and walk it along side you?" I knew he would have to walk it with us, but I was intent on waging as much psychological warfare on him as possible.

He walked over, picked up my bike, and propped it on his shoulder. "No big deal. Now, let's get going so you are not out too late."

Hmph. Trying to act like a big man, carrying my bike like that. I was certain he'd make it no more than a half mile before he had to set it down and give his shoulder a break.

We walked down the hill from the school in silence. I wasn't sure what he was waiting for, so as soon as we made it to the bottom I cleared my throat. "So... vampires, huh? I was always under the impression that vampires were supposed to be all... I dunno. Beautiful and graceful and stuff. Those monsters you were fighting looked more like zombies, with the rotting flesh and one of them missing half his face."

"They were vampires. It is a common myth that vampires are supposed to be beautiful and powerful. If I had realized the implications of Mr. Stokers' novel on the vampire myth, I would have stopped its publication."

"Dracula? That's one of my favorite classic novels! What's wrong with it?"

"It began the cultural movement that romanticized vampires. You called them zombies, which is a more accurate, though modern, word to describe what vampires are. The fact is they are human beings that died and were brought back to a lifelike state through the power of evil spirits. They are dead, don't you ever forget that. It disgusts me that so many modern authors took Mr. Stokers' ideas and elaborated on them, turning vampires into creatures to *envy* for their beauty, strength, and immortality. A dead being cannot become beautiful. It does not age, nor heal. Long ago vampires were monsters to be feared. Villages mutilated bodies before burying them to prevent them from becoming vampires. Vampires were beings that stalked the living for their life force. Depending on where you lived, people suspected different body parts were the target of vampires. Most common was blood, though the heart and liver were also common targets until vampires realized they could take just enough blood to keep from killing their victims, raising less suspicion than, say, corpses turning up with missing organs. Because of the modern picture of vampires, a truly mythical being has been created and true vampires have been

demoted to the status of ‘zombies’, mindless beings that wander around, hoping to stumble upon some sort of weak sap that is willing to offer their brain up without putting up a fight.”

“So... I should forget everything I think I know about vampires, then?”

“I do not know what you think you know about vampires.”

“Well... one common myth is that vampires can turn into bats. Is that false?”

“You would be correct.”

“Do they disintegrate or burn in the sunlight?”

“No, though they rarely go out during the day due to risk of rapid decomposition and discovery. Though most ignorant people would dismiss vampires as homeless people, the smell of rotting flesh is distinct, and if the flesh is falling off the bone no sane person would ignore the fact that they are looking at an unhealthy being.”

“Does garlic ward them off?”

“No, though garlic and lemons placed around a corpse help ward off the evil spirits that create vampires.”

“How do you slay them?”

“It depends on how old the vampire is. Staking young vampires in the heart with oak will take care of them pretty quick, and while fire can kill them, it's not the most effective way to do so - not enough dry skin and bones, you see. But older vampires fear fire more than anything else, while the heart is so shriveled that one would have to remove the organ from the chest and crush it before the vampire even notices that you are trying to kill it. Beheading is the most reliable and works well for all vampires, regardless of what stage it's at, though it can be difficult. One has to have a knife made of iron with holy symbols etched into it to cause real harm to a vampire, and the vampire has to be incapacitated before taking the head off. Are... you okay with me talking about this? I realize this may seem... gruesome.”

I shrugged. “I watched you stake and behead two vampires. Describing it to me isn't going to cause any more mental scarring than I already have. Do vampires eventually ‘die’ once they reach a certain stage of decomposition?”

He was silent for a few minutes. “No.” His tone was bitter, and I could tell he was trying to think of how to explain this to me.

“There are very old vampires in this world. A corpse is made a vampire when another old vampire drinks the blood of a recently deceased person and replaces it with some of the evil and malicious spirit the vampire harbors within his or her self, cultivating the evil in the corpse that is required for it to become its own, sentient monster.”

“You keep saying ‘evil and malicious spirit.’ What does that mean? It sounds like there's some sort of magical ceremony required.”

“I'm not clear on what the vampires do to transfer and cultivate these spirits. I do know that the older the vampire, the more evil the spirit is, and the evil is more pure. It is easier for older vampires to create new vampires, and it is easier to create vampires out of people that carried a lot of hate or malice throughout their lives. The more hate and evil and malice there is between the two beings, the faster the corpse becomes a vampire. If the vampire is still young and inexperienced, or the corpse was a good person in life, it can take as long as three weeks for a corpse to become a vampire, which is why the vampires you saw that night looked like they were decomposing.”

“But vampires do decompose, right? So they all eventually have to come to some sort of end, right?”

“I wish it were so. The oldest vampire I am aware of is over eight hundred years old, and I have heard tales that it is able to walk out in daylight without raising suspicion from humans. It requires much life force from living humans and creating many powerful vampires, but through those rituals it is possible to slow decomposition to a near stop.”

“Wait, so they do drink blood from living humans? How is this not something everyone is aware of? Do the humans ever die?”

“They do drink the blood from living beings; however one cannot continue to exist in a state like that without immersing themselves in magic. It is common for vampires to be able to wipe the minds of the humans they drink from. It is also common to find blood donation centers that are run by vampires or their thralls. They would not risk putting themselves in a position that would arouse suspicion from humans, though there are cases where they will completely drain the blood from a person to kill them and turn them into a vampire.”

“So they do have magical powers, then.”

“Yes. Are you familiar with the Darwin effect? Those that could not wipe minds were quickly slain, while those that could passed their ability on to the vampires they created. Another common ability is hypnotism, which is basically a mind wipe but is performed at the beginning of the blood drinking ritual instead of the end.”

He stopped talking. It was odd talking to him, I found. He didn't have any mannerisms that indicated when he was going to begin or end talking.

“So... is there anything else that you felt you needed to tell me?” I asked awkwardly.

“Yes. Mina, the woman that pesters me in our history class, is a vampire. I am a half-vampire.”

I stopped, then started walking backwards. I was suddenly very, very scared.

“You need to explain right now before I run and tell the police. I don't even have to tell them that you're a half vampire, I know they won't believe me, but I'm not afraid to tell them that you assaulted me.”

“I apologize. I have no desire to harm you. I will walk six feet away from you if that would make you more comfortable.” He had a very humble look on his face and took a step back, as though to show he was sincere in his offer.

I was hesitant, but we were still out in the open and I made the hopeful decision that he wouldn't make a threatening move in public. I walked closer to him, but not too close. We continued on our way.

“It is possible for a young male vampire to impregnate a female human, though it rarely happens. The result is a half-vampire, which is a being of great power, though very cursed.”

“So... is that why you seemed to not be bothered by my attacks? And why you've managed to carry my bike on your shoulder for over a mile now without getting tired?” He nodded. “Is that also why I was supposed to forget what I saw that night? Do you have the ability to wipe minds?” He nodded again. We continued on in silence for a few minutes, this time to allow me to comprehend what he had just told me.

“So... does it make you half dead?” I didn't want to know the answer to this question, not really, but it had to be asked.

He gave a sad smile and shook his head. “No, but I do carry a curse. I am very much alive, though I have been alive for quite some time and possibly for quite a while longer.”

“How old are you?”

“Somewhere between a hundred and seventy and two hundred years old.”

“Ha. No, really. How old are you?”



He didn't answer that.

"But... why... how... you don't even look that old! You only look... um..."

"I know it is difficult to discern my age. It is part of the curse. I can pass as a 16 year old or as a 26 year old, depending on the clothes I wear and the length of my hair. I keep my hair longer, like this, when I want to pass as a teenager. I am fortunate that the modern trends allow my hair discoloration to pass as a statement, rather than an abnormality to raise suspicion."

"Wow... so... how long do you expect to live?"

"I am not entirely sure. It is the mission of half vampires to slay as many vampires as possible. There are few of us, and we eventually die in the line of duty. The rumors are that the oldest one of us lived to be five hundred years old, though he was starting to show significant signs of aging before he died. I would guess that if I were to live to die of old age, I would live to approximately five hundred and fifty to six hundred years old."

"Wow... just... wow." I slowed down considerably, as my house was only about ten minutes away now. I had a lot to comprehend. Just as I was about to process everything, I realized I ignored a kind of big piece of information.

"Mina is a *VAMPIRE*?!"

"Yes."

"What is she doing at a high school? Why on earth would she spend time there?"

"She is... taunting me. I arrived here due to increased paranormal activity, discovered that the youth were the main targets, and enrolled in the local high school. She eventually revealed herself to me as a key player in this... scheme, and shows up every day to taunt me. I can never find her outside of the school building, but I find signs of the havoc she regularly causes. She was the one to turn those men into vampires. They were good men. She finds pleasure in turning good people into the monsters you saw that night."

"Does she try to create more powerful vampires?"

"She does. She targets teens as much as she can. Teens don't have as much time to develop hate. Many teens think they feel true despair, but few do. She tries to spend time with them at school to implant as many doubts and hatred in those that show the potential to... successfully turn. She enjoys a 'challenge.'"

We were now on the street my house was on. I was disappointed, actually. I felt a lot better now that I knew the truth, though it was still pretty scary.

"So why the sudden change of heart? Yesterday you were ignoring me, and now you're telling me all this stuff that, by the way, COMPLETELY changes my whole world, for... what reason?"

"You are the offspring of wardcarvers. It's why I was not able to wipe your mind – you were protected by wards. I assume that is why you were offended by my question – I originally thought you were not of human origin. Non-humans are immune to the mind wipe. You are human, but you carry a great deal of magic with you."

"Ward... carvers? What are you talking about? My father is a *woodcarver*, but I don't know what a wardcarver is."

He was uncomfortably silent as we continued walking toward my house. "I assumed you knew. I apologize."

I was overwhelmingly confused. "Tell me. What is a wardcarver? I carry magic with me? What's going on?" He stayed silent and didn't meet my gaze, no matter how hard I tried to catch his attention. "You need to tell me. You started this, you need to finish this. You said so yourself, you owe me."

“You’re right. I must warn you, though, this was information you would have been told long ago if it was important for you to know. You will not like it.

“I noticed while we were taking the test that you have a nervous habit. You have a necklace that you hide under your shirt. You took it out and were rubbing the beads on it. I could sense a great deal of magic coming from each bead as you rubbed it. I couldn’t believe it at first – I have not seen wards in a long time. There are few in the world that still practices wardcarving. I left class early to find out who your parents are. Your mother works at a library, and your father works as a woodcarver. I came here to see if your house is warded. It is. It was a logical conclusion that your mother researches and draws up the wards, and your father carves them. Wardcarvers have a very rare talent, and for a team to do it together is even rarer. They produce the best wards, but it is very rare for two people to work well enough with each other to build wards together successfully. I have only heard of one other successful team in my lifetime, and they died over a hundred years ago. Wardcarvers command a great deal of respect, which is why I had to apologize to you. I thought you had inherited their talents.

“And now I have to apologize again. I’m sure your parents had reason for not informing you of their talents. I fear I may cause a rift in the relationship between you and your parents.”

We arrived at my doorstep and I stood there, not saying anything. I wasn’t sure if I was going to have another temper tantrum or if I was going to cry. I nodded slowly, showing I heard everything. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about it. Um. I’m sorry I made you walk all this way. You can take my bike, if you want. Leave it at the school. I’ll take the bus tomorrow.”

He looked straight at me. “I cannot apologize enough. I feel I am responsible for giving a great burden of knowledge to you. One you did not need to have. I will walk back to the school; it is not a far distance. I hope you can forgive me.” He turned around and left.

Before he reached the sidewalk I called out, “I have one more question for you. Are ghosts real?”

He turned around and gave me a look that said, ‘well, *duh.*’ “Of course.”

I paused, then decided to go for broke.

“Werewolves?”

“Yes.”

“Leprechauns?”

“Indeed.”

“Unicorns?”

“I’ve seen a skull, it seemed authentic enough.”

“Dragons?”

“Extinct, though their kin live on.”

“Is there anything that *doesn’t* exist?”

“Perhaps. But I figured early on to assume that if there have been tales or myths about it, it probably exists.”

“Am I just that blind to the world, that I haven’t seen any of this before?” This time I really was close to tears, frustrated that my world was crashing down around me.

He walked back up to me, this time getting standing closer to me than he had before dared. He tentatively put his hand on my shoulder – a friendly gesture used to comfort friends, but that sent not altogether unpleasant chills down my back. He was a couple inches taller than I was, and as I stared up into his eyes and he said, in the most genuine, gentle voices I had heard from him yet, “Most people on this planet don’t see the truth, because it is too heavy a burden to bear. It is much easier to ignore the things you don’t want to believe in, the things that make life

complicated or dangerous. I cannot apologize enough that I brought this burden on you, but you are a strong person. Most girls are not so sure of themselves as to kick someone in the shin just because someone makes them angry. You'll be fine." He smiled, and I couldn't help but smile back.

He turned around and left without another word. I sat down on the front steps and watched as he walked away. I wanted to hate him so very much, but I couldn't hold on to that hatred. It's irrational to hate someone for telling you the truth. I needed to move forward. I needed to see for myself my parents' handiwork.

I went into the house and listened to see if anyone had come home yet. I didn't hear anything, which was good. I walked from room to room, studying each decoration, each piece of furniture. My father had always done detailed work on his highest quality furniture, but it wasn't until I started looking for patterns that I noticed there were certain designs that showed up frequently. On every table next to a door there were designs that looked like stylized crosses, stars, and trees. On the kitchen table, coffee table, and entertainment center there were lots of suns and masks torn in two. On my desk there were more suns, as well as feathers and scrolls. I noticed that everything had designs on them, from the handles on the kitchen knives to the frames on the wall. Some of the designs had familiar shapes to them, while most of the designs looked like letters from an exotic language – certainly nothing I could identify. I checked my window, and saw little beads sewn into the hem of the curtains. The ones going from top to bottom had designs etched into them that looked like raindrops, and the ones on the bottom looked like ripples in a pond. While I never paid that much attention to my curtains, I was willing to bet that they only appeared after I had mentioned to my parents I was hearing things at night.

I sat at my desk, wondering what spells I was activating by sitting there. I pulled my necklace out of my shirt and studied it. It was a long chain, at least 25 inches, with a fixed pendant in the very middle: a small silver piece about the size of a dime. It had a lot of swirls on it, but as I studied it (knowing I was probably looking for a design), the swirls started to look like flames. Then I studied the loose beads. There were eight larger beads – about the size of peas – with designs on them, and eight plain, smaller beads used as spacers. There were five beads with designs on them, and three with the odd letters on them. I remembered that there was also a bead fixed onto the end of the chain, next to the clasp. I turned my necklace around to look at it. It was a very peculiar design, one that looked neither like something familiar nor like a letter from the strange language which was found on everything else. It looked like two half circles with the curved sides facing each other and overlapping a bit, but one of the half circles was missing the corners, so it was more like an ark crossing over the curve of a half circle and a line hovering near that curve. This design was surrounded by a circle that was broken three times, with little, complete circles filling the gaps.

I turned my necklace back around and held it for a moment. I couldn't remember a time when I didn't have it on, but I was so upset at my parents for keeping all of this from me that I wanted to take it off. What would happen if I did? Obviously these beads were wards – what kind of "spells" had I been living with?

I was mad at my parents, and I had never been the type to put up with stuff that made me angry. I took my necklace off and stuffed it in my desk drawer. My neck suddenly felt bare, but it felt satisfying, feeling like I was somehow getting back at my parents. I didn't stop there, either – I had two picture frames on my walls that had designs carved into them, so I took them down and put them on the top shelf in my closet. It took a few minutes to get the curtain rod

down, but I took my curtains off, too, and stuffed them in my closet. I moved my night table next to my desk, so there was nothing with wards on the same side of my room as my bed. It didn't get rid of them, I knew that, but I felt better knowing I could put a small distance between me and the offending objects.

My mind was at ease now, and I turned to my schoolwork for the day.

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER FIVE

That night I ate dinner quickly and quietly and went straight back to my room. My parents knocked on my door a couple of times to see if I was okay, and I did my best to pretend I was. They left me alone, either because I was convincing or out of respect for my personal space.

That night I couldn't sleep. In part it was because there was too much to think about, and partially because I wanted to sit by my window and see if anything would happen in the graveyard that night. Now that I knew to expect supernatural stuff to happen, I was anxious to see what was going on in our neighborhood.

Up until about one in the morning nothing too exciting happened. I saw a couple of ghosts walk through at about eleven, but it was brief. I was just about to give up and go to bed, but then I saw a figure dart through the cemetery, stopping to hide behind a tree. I waited, sitting as still as I could, alert for any further movement. It took another twenty minutes, but another similar figure darted in and hid behind a tree as well. Within the next ten minutes more and more came in, each choosing a tree to use as cover.

I don't know what they were hiding from, but I knew it probably wasn't me, as a couple that came in hid on the side of the tree that was facing me, so I got a good look at it.

They were about the size of children, but their proportions suggested they were fully grown. They were also really, really skinny, which made their limbs look really long. They were all one color – their skin, their hair, and their clothes. I couldn't tell where their skin ended and their hair and clothes began. In fact, it was hard to tell if they even had clothes on, though there was a break at their wrists that suggested they had sleeves on, so I hoped that they were clothed. I couldn't tell what color they were exactly, but they were a pretty light color in the moonlight, and if I caught one moving out of the corner of my eye, I could have sworn they were giving off a greenish-bluish color. Their hair floated in the air, making it look like they were floating in the water.

Soon they all must have arrived, because they started moving away from the trees and approaching each headstone.

I watched as they each produced small candles - little tea light candles, really - and place them on each gravestone they stopped at. They lit them up, one by one, and watched for about ten seconds as each light burned. The interesting thing was that each flame burned a slightly different color than the next. Most were a cool blue or turquoise, but some burned more greenish and there were even a couple that burned yellow or orange. After they observed the candle on one stone, they moved to the next stone and lit up a new candle, leaving the one previous to continue burning. There were at least a dozen of the creatures, and the cemetery wasn't very big, so in all it took about a half hour for the entire cemetery to be lit up with these candles. The effect was beautiful, all these soft, flickering lights glowing in the night, and these small, graceful creatures weaving their way through the gravestones.

Once they finished lighting up a candle on each of the headstones, they gathered in the middle of the graveyard and circled together, facing in and holding hands. It was too far away to say for sure, but I think they were chanting something. It only took about a minute for them to finish this chant, and they all started moving in a group to each of the headstones that had candles that burned a warmer color. They circled the headstone and put their hands in the middle and chanted another chant. The warmer the color was, the longer they had to chant. By the end of their chant the candle would be a cool blue again, and they moved to the next candle that burned a warmer color. It was fascinating, how gracefully they completed this ritual, yet how quickly they got it done. There were only around twenty or so candles that they needed to take care of, and when they finished they went back to the center of the graveyard and did another chant in a circle, this time facing out. When they let go of each others' hands, all the candles went out at the same time. Each creature helped gather up the candles, and when the last one was gathered, they left. From the time they lit the first candle to cleaning up the last one, about an hour and a half had passed by.

I wasn't sure what they were, but I suddenly felt more at peace than I had in a long time. It was a beautiful ritual, whatever it was, and I knew that no creature could create something that beautiful and be evil. It was comforting to know that, in a world filled with vampires and werewolves and ghosts, there were beings of good, too.

I was tired, definitely, but still not sleepy. I leaned against the window sill and rested my chin on my folded arms. I waited another forty five minutes at my window before something else passed by. I knew right away it was a vampire, thanks to Jack's through description. She was a decently-made vampire, nothing like the zombie-like creatures I had seen my first night next to my window, but she walked with a limp and looked too pale and gaunt to be human. She was holding her arm and looking around, as though she was paranoid someone was following her. Suddenly a figure jumped from a tree branch, knocking her down onto the ground. The figure had a stake in hand and in one quick motion thrust it up beneath the sternum into the heart.

Jack pulled the stake out of the decomposing pile of flesh and cleaned it against the grass. He stood up, put it back in his trench coat, and looked up to my window. He smiled and held a hand up in greeting. I smiled back, and he turned around to leave.

I must have fallen asleep pretty quickly after that, because the next thing I remember is hearing my mom's panicked voice and being shaken. I slowly sat up, stretching my aching arms and shoulders. I was still in my seat in front of my window, and judging from the amount of light coming in I guessed that I had definitely slept way past my alarm. I didn't care, though. Even though I had just woken up, I felt like I had a clear head and knew exactly how my day was going to go.

"My goodness, what were you DOING last night?!" My mom asked, the tone in her voice indicating she was barely capable of keeping from yelling at me.

"Watching the graveyard." I replied matter-of-factly.

"What did you do to your room? It's a disaster!"

"I was angry with it and moved everything around. Thanks for asking how I'm doing, by the way. Decor before daughter, that's gotta be a successful parenting technique."

She stood there with her mouth open. I don't blame her; my siblings and I treated our parents with nothing but respect, even when we were mad at them. Most of the time we just gave our parents the silent treatment when we wanted to let them know we didn't like what they were saying or doing, and while I was a pretty sarcastic person to everyone else, I did my best to

bite my tongue around mom and dad. Never, in the history of our family, had anyone said anything rude to mom. She narrowed her eyes and looked at my neck.

"Are you wearing your necklace?" She asked, her mood switching from a more explosive rage to a quiet, dangerous anger.

"No. Why does it matter? Is it supposed to keep me from speaking my mind? Or is there so you can control what I do?" Uh oh. I was angry, but I'd never been THIS way before. I was actually trying to start a fight with my mom, and I couldn't stop myself. I stood up to get in her face and started yelling. "No good parent would keep secrets like you and dad have from their kids!"

She slapped me. I slapped her back. I was seeing everything through a wall of red, and my temper was quickly slipping out of my control. All the peacefulness and clarity of thought I had gotten from the night before was nowhere to be found. I felt like vessel for anger. "You BITCH!" I yelled, and made a fist, ready to cause some serious damage.

But my mom was quick, and in one fluid moment caught my fist and slipped something around my wrist. I immediately felt like someone had spun me around until I was dizzy, and then dropped me into a freezing cold pool of water. I sat on the edge of my bed, nauseous. Mom leaned down so her face was level with mine, and asked, "Are you okay?" I nodded. "I need you to tell me where you put your necklace."

I was still nauseous. I took a deep breath in, deep breath out, and managed to whisper "drawer" before leaning over the side of my bed and vomiting.

My mother looked in my desk and found my necklace quickly. She handled it carefully, as though it were made of glass, inspecting each bead carefully. She walked over to me, put the necklace around my neck, then took her bracelet back, slipping it around her own wrist. She smoothed my hair and said in the most soothing voice possible, "Let's get you cleaned up. And then we'll talk."

I let out a weak little laugh. "I had a plan today. I was going to tell you and dad... that I needed to stay home 'sick' from school today, so we could all talk."

Mom smiled. "I think that given the circumstances, that's an excellent idea."

Mom and Dad called in to work, Mom claiming she was sick and Dad telling his employees that his wife and daughter were incredibly ill and needed him to make sure they didn't get worse. This was probably half true, given my current state.

After I ate breakfast, we stayed sitting at the kitchen table and talked for hours. They told me everything - not just about their being wardcarvers, but why my necklace was important and why we moved so often. I told them all I knew - some of which surprised them, and some of which didn't.

When my mom and dad were teenagers, they each discovered that when they drew certain pictures, the way people acted around them changed. It took a long time for them to figure out the correlation, of course, and neither of them truly believed it until they met each other in college. Mom was older by a couple of years, and was on her last semester before graduating in medieval literature. Dad was only a few semesters in, and even though he was majoring in architecture, he minored in medieval literature, so they met at one of their literature classes. They immediately hit it off, though in hindsight it was obvious why - my mother's name is "Lucie", which means "light", and my father's name is "Geth", which means "dark". They were the perfect complement to each other, and while over time they assimilated each others' personalities, during their college years their personalities matched their names perfectly. Mom was bubbly and outgoing, though easily distracted, which showed in her hasty schoolwork. Dad

was more quiet and reserved, and had a tendency to over think things, which often resulted in work too complicated to understand.

Once they found out that they could each draw pictures that had power, they were thrilled to find someone else that could do what they could do, and they started researching why they could do it - it was part of the reason why they were studying medieval literature. They would have access to books and records that took seriously what modern scientists would dismiss as voodoo.

Over time they discovered that they had the rare talent of wardcarvers, and that by etching or carving wards into metal or wood, their wards would be more stable and powerful. They started working as a team - mom, who was good at researching a lot of material in a small amount of time, was able to draw up wards that had great meaning, while dad, who was patient enough to sit and concentrate for long amounts of time, was able to accurately carve these symbols into wood.

They eventually got married and soon after were pregnant with Ammon. They were young, Dad had to explain to me at this point, and didn't fully comprehend the power names had, especially from families that had the potential for great power running through their veins. It wasn't until after Ammon was born that they looked up the meaning of his name, and discovered that the Egyptian god of Air was named Amon. They didn't think about it much at first, but when he hit his "terrible twos" they discovered that he took after his name. He never walked anywhere; he ran. He couldn't focus on any one thing for longer than a few minutes, and he constantly wanted to play "extreme hide and go seek", where he changed his hiding spot every minute or so.

When they discovered they were pregnant with a daughter when Ammon was two and a half, they were much wiser at this point and knew that they had to name her Terra. Earth was the opposite of air; hopefully having a daughter named after the earth would bring balance to the household.

It did, but they didn't live peacefully for long. Mom and dad were suddenly thrown into the world of the supernatural when they were attacked by a demonling in the middle of the night. They were saved by a half vampire that had been pursuing the creature that night. They were terrified, naturally, though the half vampire was patient and was willing to explain what had just happened. She - the half vampire - told them that wardcarvers were often targets of beings of evil, since they could create powerful items that dispelled evil. If the demon knew where they lived, then others were sure to follow. The half vampire told them that they would be safest in large cities, or places with a lot of people. It would be difficult to find them with so many people around them, since the aura they now carried with them would just mix and dissolve with the other auras in the city.

She didn't realize how powerful my parents were, though, and it was difficult to hide their aura for very long. Once they got rooted in an area, they would start attracting attention and they would have to move. Having another kid wasn't the first thing on their mind, but soon mom was pregnant again, I was born, and they realized that they had no choice but to continue to attempt to bring balance to the family and gave me a name that meant "born of fire." Life continued on in this pattern, where they would move, settle down, then be forced to move again. Arvin (which, as you can probably guess at this point, means "water") arrived, and they finally felt that none of their kids would get too out of control. We calmed down a bit, but still had a tendency to get in trouble when we were apart. That's where my necklace came from - the silver pendant represented me, and five of the beads represented my sister, brothers, and mom and dad. They

threw on a few extra wards, the protective and concerned parents that they are, which brings us up to this point.

The bead at the clasp of my necklace was their "sealing" symbol - the symbol they put on every piece they did to show that they worked on it together, and to strengthen the wards that were there. After the five beads for my family, one bead was for luck, one was for health, and one was for protection.

"When we made that particular bead, we were still young and didn't realize that we had created a situation that not only protected you from those that would cause you harm, but it protected you from seeing the truth. We wouldn't have realized it until you mentioned those nights that you saw stuff in the graveyard." My dad explained.

"I didn't say I saw anything there, though. I just mentioned noises and asked if you believe in ghosts. Instead of lying to me you could have just told me then." I was a little irritated about that.

"Yes, well, we never said 'yes' or 'no' to your questions. We couldn't lie to you, but you had never mentioned anything supernatural until then, so we panicked and handled it the way we thought best."

"You knew what I was talking about?"

"Yes. We were aware of what had happened those two nights."

"You sewed the beads onto my curtains?"

"Yes. Running water is a fairly universal symbol to dispel evil, so falling water and ripples seemed appropriate, since we weren't sure what was going to pop up next. We sewed beads onto all the curtains in our house, just as a precaution."

"So what does that have to do with this bead on my necklace? What changed?"

Mom spoke up at this point. "You know your nervous habit of rubbing the beads? You had managed to rub down part of the symbol on the bead of protection. I'll have to do research, but it must have been the part that protected you from seeing the evil around you. I think you're still safe from the harm of others, but we'll make a new bead for you anyway. And... we're sorry about making you wear it. The necklace, I mean. We forgot how much of a balance it was to you. Your... outburst... this morning proved that."

"What do you mean?"

"Your personality reflects what fire would act like if it were personified. Before we gave you that necklace, you had a tendency to feel emotions to the extreme. If you were sad, you'd be sobbing. If you were angry, you were throwing things around. If you were happy, you couldn't stop laughing and trying to make others laugh. You're still the most emotional child I've ever met, but back then... well, it was never boring with you, that's for certain." Dad gave me an encouraging smile.

"So... when Mom put her bracelet on me this morning, it was to bring balance to my emotions again?"

"That was the intent, yes, though it didn't work as well as your necklace would have. Her bracelet was specifically made for her, which is why you became sick after she put it on you. It brought balance, but not the right kind of balance, and with you on a rampage it would have been like... well, like forcing you to swim in a race after you had been training for tennis for a year. Your body doesn't have the right memory for it, so it was rebelling against the new situation."

"Do I have to wear this necklace for the rest of my life?"

Mom and dad were silent for a moment, and gave each other looks that told me I wasn't going to be happy with their response.



"There are... outlets. Each of your siblings has a similar piece of jewelry or accessory to keep with them, but they each have activities they can do that help them maintain a natural balance, so it's not necessary for them." Mom explained.

Dad interrupted, eager to explain this part. "Ammon is fine as long as he's traveling. We've always tried to find a place with room for a garden for Terra to take care of. Arvin is still pretty young, so we try to make sure he carries the keychain we made for him around at all times, but we're going to enroll him in swimming soon."

"So... what about me? What's my outlet?"

"We... don't know. Sweetie, you have to understand, fire is very unpredictable. We never knew how you were going to feel when you woke up in the morning, how you were going to structure your day. You could never follow a schedule because you always did whatever you wanted. We were afraid that there wouldn't be a safe activity for you to practice, and that you would have to find a way to set stuff on fire in order to find your proper outlet." Dad tried to take my hand to comfort me, but I didn't want him to touch me. The tears in my eyes were going to start falling if he did, and I wanted to be strong.

"So you're saying I'm stuck with this? But... I've set stuff on fire before! I burn the origami figures I make at least once a year, and I'm very careful about it! I've never let the fire get out of control!"

"But you've always had your necklace on. You have an affinity for fire - you could probably make a campfire in the middle of a wheat field during a drought and it wouldn't leave the area you designate it to be in. Our concern isn't about you controlling the fire, it's controlling yourself. We don't know that you wouldn't want to set even more things on fire, and let your desire to be around fire grow until you're setting fire to things that should be left alone. We trust you, and we love you, and it's our fault for putting you in this situation. We cannot tell you how much we regret what we've done to you."

Now I was crying silently. I sniffed and asked, "Does Ammon and Terra and Arvin know about... everything? All the stuff you've just told me?"

Mom twitched a shoulder in a half-shrug. "I don't know. If they do, they've never mentioned it to us. Even though Ammon and Terra have days where they don't wear their wards, they still wear them most of the time, so I'm assuming that ward of protection is still intact for them. And when they aren't wearing them... well, people don't look for what they don't expect or want to see."

"So I've heard. But I did see things. I didn't expect to see vampires that night, but I still saw them."

"You're a very bright person, and open to new ideas. I think you saw them because you had already been suspicious of the graveyard, and seeing monsters there didn't go against your expectations," Dad suggested.

"Don't you have to tell Ammon and Terra and Arvin about all this magic eventually? They can't go their whole lives without suspecting something, right? What if they start drawing wards and are targeted by demons and stuff?"

"None of you have shown signs of inheriting our abilities. If you weren't surrounded by so much magic, or if your father and I didn't have the abilities we have, it's entirely possible that your names would just be names, with no symbolism or power behind them at all. We'd like to think that eventually Ammon will spend enough time away from us and balance his life out through enough traveling that the wind will work out of him and he can settle down and live a normal life, none the wiser of the world he has unknowingly lived in the first part of his life. Or

it's possible he will have to travel for the rest of his life. I don't know. Either way, though, he won't draw any unwanted attention to himself. Wherever he goes it will be windy when he wants it to, and still when he doesn't care. I'm sure he doesn't even realize he's capable of that. Beyond that, he has no special abilities, not unless he consciously tries to develop them."

I realized I was rubbing the pendant on my necklace, then let it go. Suddenly this piece of jewelry that had been the one constant in my life felt like a prison. I was still crying, but only a few tears. Mom and dad were quiet, waiting until I was ready to talk again to continue this conversation. I decided to switch up topics a little bit.

"Why did we live in San Francisco so long? And what caused us to move here?"

Dad actually laughed at this a bit. "Oh man. San Francisco was great for us because it is so full of magic. We probably could have lived there forever and never have been found. Did you know that the Adams' had elf blood in them?"

"Wait... our next door neighbors? They were elves?!"

"Only partly. But enough that they were able to perform magic. And we were pretty sure that your principle had troll blood in him, though very diluted."

I gave the first genuine laugh I had all day at this.

"To answer your second question, we got an offer that we couldn't pass up. A man named Calvin Briggs contacted us and said he was going to build a group to teach those who have the potential to become wardcarvers how to develop their talents, and he wanted us to help teach the kids he found. From what he told us, there are only five fully practicing wardcarvers in the entire world, and we're the only two in the United States. One lives in Germany, one in Italy, and one lives in India, so it's important that we try to develop those that have the talent so we're not spread so thin."

"But... why here? Aren't we in danger since this place is so small and rural? Don't you attract a lot of attention?"

"Part of the reason this is a good place is because it's a good, medium-sized town. Not so small as to attract a lot of attention, but not too large as to get confused in the noise of the place. That, and this place is actually fairly saturated with magic. The mountains are home to trolls, the forest is full of dryads and elves, and... well, magic attracts magic, so there's lots of people here that are involved in the supernatural, whether they are aware of it or not."

I nodded, finally understanding. "Okay. That's fair enough. I don't really like it here, you know. It never felt right to me, even though I'm trying really hard to like it."

Mom and dad nodded, but didn't seem too upset. "We don't expect you to like it. But we'd appreciate it if you tried to tolerate it. And now that you know all this, maybe it won't be so bad."

"Maybe." I wasn't going to have any new expectations of this place, but I was at least a little hopeful.

After we were finished talking, I asked my parents about the wards we had around our house. The sun, which was the most common ward, represented clarity. The mask torn in half represented truth. Trees were a common symbol to ward off evil, so they were put as close to doors as possible. They explained how, when they made wards for furniture, they wanted to make the wards as broad as possible, so they encouraged, rather than forced, whatever they stood for. Our kitchen table was a good example, and why we had our conversation there. The suns helped us understand each other, and the masks torn in half encouraged us to tell the truth. I tested it out, just for fun, and tried telling my parents a story of something that could have

happened to me at school, but didn't really. I was able to get through the story, but I could tell I wasn't convincing my parents, and I kept stumbling over words.

"So can you make wards to, say, force people to tell the truth?" I asked.

Dad looked concerned at this. "It's possible, but that's wandering into the realm of evil. I've read about wardcarvers that used their ability for impure intentions, and they quickly become corrupt."

"But what if you were trying to get a confession out of a criminal? Wouldn't that be a good intention?"

"You'd think so, but you're still taking away someone's free will, and taking away someone's ability to choose is never a good idea."

Mom interrupted Dad and started rambling about how wardcarving was a very sensitive art, and how there were lots of rules to follow. I waited patiently for her to finish, but let my attention wander halfway through. I think she finally understood and wrapped up hastily with, "Whatever happens, we only make our wards with the purest intent. We won't ever put you in a situation where you have to worry about us or what we're doing." She gave me a hug and kissed me on my forehead. "Do you feel better?" I nodded. "Good. Now, go do yoga or go on a run or do what you need to in order to get your head cleared. And remember, we're always going to be here for you."

I nodded again and went upstairs to my room to change. Jogging wasn't my first choice, but I had too much energy to sit and draw or do any sort of meditation. I left and ran wherever I felt like going, not caring if I had been in a certain neighborhood before or not. I was out jogging for a full hour before coming back home, and by the time I got back Dad had already gone to my school and picked up the homework I had missed that day. It felt odd, trying to fall back into a normal routine knowing what I now knew, but that, to me, was what courage was - moving forward and doing what you needed to do, despite how difficult or terrifying it may seem.

Since I was supposed to be sick I had to say no to going out with my friends (they thought I was faking it just because I wanted to skip school, but lying to them about being sick was easier than trying to come up with a lie that explained why I would have wanted to stay home), not that I wanted to go out with them anyway. I wanted to watch what happened in the graveyard again that night, and again without my necklace on. I kept it close to me, just in case, but I was anxious to see what happened with no spells to interfere with my view.

Now everything had the possibility of being magic. I thought I saw a tree branch move, and I imagined that it was the spirit of the tree stretching. There were fireflies, but they could have been fairies for all I knew. It was a full moon, and the large, scruffy-looking dog that trotted through was probably a werewolf. I fell asleep at my window sill again, but I couldn't have told you when. There was no difference between what I was seeing and what I dreamt about.

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER SIX

Another week passed by with nothing too interesting happening. It took me a couple of days to muster the courage to approach him, but I started spending my lunches with Jack. I'm not sure why I was afraid, but there was something about him that intimidated me. Maybe it was the fact that he was so old and had seen so much. Maybe I was afraid that he wanted to keep to isolation and that he would only put up with me out of respect for my parents. But, as I weighed the pros

and cons, I realized that having someone that wasn't related to me to talk to was more important than what he thought of me. The first day I approached him we wandered off to a fairly secluded part of the quad and I told him about my parents. He was quiet during my story, and afterwards he asked me, "Are you okay with all this? Really, truly okay? I've seen many people learn the truth that goes insane over time. They start seeing beings that are a threat to their well being everywhere they look, and can't handle the stress of constantly living in fear."

I thought about it a moment, then nodded definitively. "I could be afraid, but there's good, too. My parents made sure to teach us - me and my siblings, I mean - about balance, so I know that there can't truly be more evil than good. Maybe the evil makes itself more obvious, but I've seen some things to counterbalance that, too." I told him about what happened before I saw him kill the female vampire, and he looked at me with surprise.

"What you saw was very rare. They're a special group of soul collectors - the ones you saw are the only ones in the world of their kind. They are called the Eldraif, and they visit every place where a person is buried and makes sure that the soul is at peace, wherever it is. What you saw was them checking that the souls of the people buried at that cemetery were at peace, and singing to those who were not at peace a special chant to calm them down. They finish it up with a chant to help maintain an overall peace at that graveyard. This is good - it will be very difficult for Mina to make any vampires out of the bodies that are buried there for a while."

"Are there more than one kind of soul collectors?"

"Yes. Different cultures call them different things - Americans call them 'grim reapers', and they more often than not imagine the soul collectors that bring those who have been judged impure to hell. The Japanese call them 'shinigami', and while the term has become broader in definition, they tend to think of the soul collectors that have a hand in the actual death of a person."

"How many types of soul collectors are there?!"

"Who knows? Death is a confusing, bureaucratic process, really. You'd be better off trying to avoid it as long as possible." He winked at this, and I giggled. Despite the emotionless, tough image he tried to make of himself to others, he was actually pretty funny.

I sought him out the next couple of lunches and asked him about some of the things he had done in his life. Where and when he was born, places he'd been. He couldn't remember anything from his childhood - when vampires are created, they spend several years living in madness, only half aware of their surroundings and what they are doing. Half vampires suffer from the same curse, so by the time he was able to clearly remember what he was doing, anywhere between twenty and thirty years had passed. One of his first memories was spending a summer with Bram Stoker, which I found ironic on a couple of levels. First was that he knew someone that could provide an accurate description of how vampires really were, and he missed the mark by a long shot. Second is that I realized when Jack had mentioned that he would have stopped Stoker from publishing that book, it was more out of hindsight rather than wishful thinking.

That Friday he surprised me by walking me home again. I realized that I was actually really happy that he wanted to spend time with me, and that he wasn't just putting up with me. We walked very slowly, and talked about normal stuff. Movies, books, and amusement parks we'd been to and our favorite rides in each park. I talked about how one day I wanted to travel to Australia and spend a summer with the aborigines. I had no particular reason for wanting to do this, I had to explain, no particular fascination with their culture or the continent itself. It just sounded like an adventure, and I wanted to experience something exciting and maybe a little dangerous.

"You don't feel like spending time with a half vampire is exciting and a little dangerous?" He asked, raising an eyebrow and giving me a goofy grin.

"Ha. You have a point. I suppose my idea of an adventure probably seems a little lame relative to all the exciting stuff that's happening in my own backyard. But this adventure of mine is something I would choose to be a part of. Besides, I'm not actually running around with you slaying vampires. All I know firsthand is what I've witnessed from my bedroom window."

"You could go down there, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"If you wanted to, you could spend a night in the graveyard and spend some time with the ghosts. They're really nice, for the most part, and since the Eldraif cleansed the place recently it should be safe. I'd be with you, of course, since you never know what could wander through, but if you wanted to be a part of it, all you have to do is hop the fence."

I didn't answer. He had a point, and I had never thought of it before, but suddenly the idea of actually being down there seemed intimidating. Though I wasn't far away, I realized I felt safe in the ward-protected house.

"You don't have to, of course, it's just a suggestion," Jack hastily said, trying to make me feel comfortable again.

We didn't talk much the rest of the way, not that it was very far. It was still a little awkward, though, but I thought it was going to be better once we reached the porch. Nope, it was worse. Once he placed my bike in its spot next to the door he turned to face me and didn't say anything for a few seconds. I wasn't sure what to say, either. Finally he broke the ice and said, "Thank you for allowing me to walk you home. I haven't had a decent conversation like that with anyone for a long time."

"Yeah, umm... thanks for walking me home. Um." I compulsively gave him a quick half hug. "Um. See you Monday?"

He had a look on his face I couldn't decipher. It was a mixture of surprise and... embarrassment? I could feel my face turn red as I realized that I really, really shouldn't have hugged him. He finally nodded, though, and said, "Yeah. Monday."

I walked in the house as he turned away and immediately ran up to my room. I threw myself on my bed and screamed into my pillow. What had I been thinking? I didn't think hugs were that big of a deal. I gave and received hugs all the time at my last high school without thinking about it. Did he read more into it than I had? Was there something about half-vampire culture that they just didn't give hugs? Did I seriously offend him in some way? God, I shouldn't have been so impulsive. Why was I worrying so much about it? I hugged him because that's how I showed appreciation to people I felt I was friends with. I hugged people all the time. He wasn't required to know that about me, but he shouldn't have reacted the way he did. Maybe he didn't see us as friends? Oh no. Maybe he really was just putting up with me. Then why would he ask to walk me home?

I went to my desk and spent the next two hours drawing on sheets of origami paper. The drawings had jagged shapes, quickly drawn. I folded them into sloppy, non-specific shapes like boxes or stars. I hung them up, but tore them down again almost immediately. They didn't look right next to all the other shapes. I strung them on a completely new line and pinned it up on the other side of the room. After all that I felt a little better. Not too much better, but enough that I didn't feel like dwelling on the issue any more. I left my room and didn't return for several hours.

As I was getting ready for bed, though, I kept staring at the line of origami. Not the new one, the old one. I realized that the reason why the figures I folded earlier looked so weird on that line was because it was already complete. I only did one other piece since the dragon – the flower box I folded the day I had stayed home from school to talk with my parents. They answered so many questions that all the other things I had been worrying about were things I didn't worry about any more. The shapes I made where I was worrying about moving from San Francisco and leaving my friends, that night I had first seen Jack slaying the vampires... I had answers to all of them now. I was ready to burn this line and start a new one.

I never planned burning these strings of paper out ahead of time. It was impulsive - though, knowing why I was the way I was, what with personifying fire and all, it made sense to me now. I dressed in purple and red - colors that blended in the dark well. I had a special lighter that I used for this ritual and dug it out from the back of my desk drawer. There wasn't actually anything all that special about it, really, but it was the one I used to burn my first string of origami and I was attached to it.

I waited until five minutes to midnight to sneak out of the house. Though through recent observations I now knew that the most magical stuff happened well past midnight, I still clung to the belief that midnight was the 'witching hour'. I had done this ritual several times before, but I was excited for tonight. I decided I was going to perform this ritual in the graveyard, and while I was terrified of what could happen, I was also excited that I was going to contribute in some small way to all the excitement that happened there on a nightly basis. I could feel my heart beating in my throat as I climbed over our backyard fence to enter the graveyard, in fear, anticipation and excitement. I realized I had never actually been in the graveyard before, and I felt I was wandering into someplace forbidden.

I knew exactly where I wanted to go. There was a spot near the back of the graveyard that had a circular area paved with cobblestones and a sundial that, when I arrived, was dedicated to someone that died over forty years ago. I placed my origami near the base of the sundial and flicked my lighter on. I started with the oldest piece, and gently touched each paper figurine with the flame in the order which I made them. I stood back and put my hands in my pockets, satisfied with the way each piece curled up and crumpled into ash.

Suddenly that dangerous silence I knew all too well fell on the graveyard, and I felt a cold breeze brush past. You know when you touch something that's cold enough that you aren't sure if it's wet or not, but not so cold that it burns? It was that kind of uncomfortable coldness. It was still warm enough at that point of the year that the breezes should have only started to get cool, so I knew something was wrong. I looked around quickly, hoping to see whatever was causing this change in temperature. I didn't see anything, but still took off at a brisk walk back towards home. I would get up early tomorrow morning to clean up the ashes; right now something was telling me to get out of there, and fast.

I didn't see it coming at all. Suddenly I was being strangled from behind and struggling to escape its grasp. I was doing my best to kick and elbow what was behind me, but its arms were long enough that I couldn't do more than scrape its shins. I tried to scream out, but its cold, clammy fingers were pressing into my throat hard enough that all I could do was let out a hoarse whisper of a scream. I could feel myself losing consciousness, and my vision was getting dark. A dim thought surfaced and I reached for my lighter. As soon as I had my hand on it I remembered - if this were a vampire, trying to set it on fire would scare it off real quick. I held up the lighter to the things arm and flicked it on. The result was instant, but just as horrifying as being strangled. I was thrown away from my assailant and it let out an unearthly scream. The

sound was unmistakably full of pain, fear, and anger, but it sounded as though five people were screaming at once. I covered my ears, hoping it would stop. It didn't, but I dared to look at it anyway. It was a vampire, sure, but it was the most zombie-like vampire I had seen yet. It barely had clothes hanging on it, and there was not much more skin, either. Places where there weren't much muscle had bones exposed; on the skull, forearms and shins. The muscle that was exposed was dull and rotting. I couldn't even tell if it had been a man or a woman in life.

The vampire was stumbling in a circle, trying to wave its arm around to get the fire out, screaming the whole time. I got up and started to back away, not sure if it would be a good idea to leave it there, or if it would be an even worse idea to be caught here with it.

I didn't have to worry about that for too long, though. I heard something running up behind me and turned around quickly, afraid I was going to be attacked again. To my great relief, it was Jack. He looked at me, to the vampire behind me, then back at me, panicked, yelling, "No! Keep thinking about the fire!" I turned back around to the vampire, and to my horror the fire was almost out. There was a single, small flame, and the vampire stopped concentrating on the fact that it was on fire and started lurching towards me again. By this time Jack had caught up to where I was and kept running towards the monster, executing a perfect jump kick and knocking the vampire to the ground. He turned back to face me, struggling to keep the vampire pinned down. "Kenna! Keep thinking about it being on fire! Do it now!!"

I did so, though I wasn't sure what it was going to do. To my surprise, the flame suddenly flared and started spreading up the vampire's arm and to its torso. Jack jumped up, and then stomped on the monster's throat to silence its screaming. It took less than a minute for the vampire to be consumed in the flames, and only another minute for it to turn to ash. Jack waited, not moving, until the final flame was out. Once it was he turned immediately towards me and half-jogged to where I was standing. "Are you alright?"

I was shaking pretty badly, but I nodded quickly and tried to discreetly wipe away a couple of unshed tears that had formed in my eyes. "What... What was that? A vampire, right?"

Jack's face darkened. "It was, though it was one of the worst kinds there are. They're what we classify as an abomination. When a powerful vampire tries to turn someone that was very good in life - and I'm talking about someone who dedicated their life to serving others and trying to better the world - it takes a long, long time for the corpse to turn into something that can rise from the grave. The hatred the powerful vampire had has time to fester, though, and when the vampire rises it rises as an abomination, even to other vampires. It's a shell of a being, open to any force that can take advantage of it. It's easy for ghosts to possess this being, and as many as seven or eight ghosts can inhabit a single being in this state."

"I thought you said this graveyard was clean."

"It is. This abomination came from somewhere else. Probably a couple of towns away."

"Why would it come here?"

"I do not know. It's why I was late to take it down. I knew there was something evil that had entered the town, but something was protecting its exact location. It was... fortunate that I was close by when it attacked you. I'm sorry you had to experience that. Why were you here, anyway? I told you I needed to be here with you if you were going to spend time here at night."

"It's... this thing I do. I wasn't planning on it." I had never told anyone besides my parents about my ritual, and was kind of embarrassed to explain it to someone I hadn't known for that long, regardless of how understanding he may be. "I would actually like to clean up, if that's okay."

“Of course.” He followed behind me as I walked back to the pile of ash where I had set my paper figures on fire. All that was left was a bit of the string, which was not unusual. I picked it up and put it in my pocket, then swept as much ash as I could into my hand, and stood and waited. It took a couple of minutes, but eventually I felt a breeze. As soon as I felt it, I threw the ash in the air and let the wind take it away. It wasn’t a strong breeze, and it didn’t take the ash very far, but the ritual was done and I was satisfied.

I clapped my hands together to get the extra ash off, and turned to face Jack, smiling. “Done! Would you care to walk me home?”

“Absolutely.” He held his arm out in a very old-time, gentlemanly fashion, and after a moment’s hesitation I rested my hand on his arm. We walked slowly towards my house in silence. When we reached the fence, we stopped and parted, revisiting the awkward moment we had had only hours ago.

He cleared his throat. “I assume you want to sneak in the back door, and not go around to the front?” I shrugged, then nodded. “Would you like a leg up?”

“Sure.” He started to kneel, but I stopped him. “I’m sorry. For earlier.”

“What do you mean?”

“I gave you a quick hug, and I got the impression it made you uncomfortable. I’m sorry. I’m just used to hugging people when I say goodbye.”

He gave me a strained, embarrassed smile. “I’m sorry. I... had not received any sort of human interaction like that for a long time. It was unexpected, but not unpleasant. I did not want to give the impression I was upset. You took me by surprise, was all.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you had been by yourself for that long.”

“It’s the way it has to be.”

“But why? I don’t understand.”

“I will explain one day, perhaps. But you have been through much tonight, and I do not wish for you to have more to worry about. I will leave it at this: thank you for the hug; it took me by surprise, but it means a lot to me that you feel comfortable enough with me to give me such a parting.”

I giggled, amused by his mannerisms. “It’s okay. I’m sorry I caught you by surprise.”

Another awkward pause. Then, carefully, he asked, “May I give you a hug?”

I grinned, finally feeling relaxed around him again. “Of course. You didn’t need to ask.”

It was a quick hug, very polite and friendly. We parted, smiled at each other, and he gave me a boost over my fence without another word.

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The rest of the weekend was uneventful. I didn’t feel like doing anything, so I mostly tried to read and watch movies. It was hard to focus on anything, though, since any time I moved my neck I could feel a dull, aching pain where the abomination had tried to choke me.

What’s worse is that what used to be my favorite book now just made me sick to my stomach. I tried to muscle through it anyway, but all I could do was be hyper critical about it.

*The Bronze Gear* series was a set of novels set in an alternate-universe, steampunk themed antebellum south where the civil war ended because of a zombie apocalypse. It had been a guilty pleasure, I’ll admit, and always had a spot on the top shelf regardless of what books I grew out of



and replaced. The main heroine always ended up getting caught up in some end-of-the-world situation and managed to come up with spur of the moment plans to save everyone. She was young, attractive, smart, and had no problem speaking her mind. I had always liked to think I could identify with her, but when I tried finding solace in the fifth book, which had always been my favorite, all I could do was roll my eyes. She dove into situations too quickly when she should have taken the time to plan better. She tried using *guns* against the zombies.

What made me put the book down was one of the big battles between the heroine's stalwart crew of outcasts versus a horde of zombies. It was three humans against ten zombies. The zombies were slow and stupid, and the humans triumphed with minimal injuries. I kept telling myself that the author had no idea what "zombies" were really like and that as far as she knew she was writing fantasy, but the inaccuracies still angered me.

I ended up reading the romance novel I had gotten from the consignment store instead, which was more of a fantasy book than any installment of *The Bronze Gear* series.



Midterm tests started rolling out on Monday, and while midterm exams weren't an official 'thing' that the district required of teachers, it still felt like they were out to inflict as much stress on their students by planning on administering comprehensive unit tests all in the same week. Tuesday was particularly stressful as the realization hit me that I was going to be bogged down in quite a bit of studying, and I almost skipped going to dance club, but decided that the exercise could only help relieve some of the stress.

I was distracted, though, and had to sit out for the last ten minutes of practice because I was dancing too quick and jerky for the ballet side of the studio, but was letting myself get sloppy on the martial arts side. I was about to pack up and leave when Dane, the unofficial leader of the club, tapped my shoulder and said, "Kenna, do you think you could stick around for a bit? Just for a few minutes after everyone's left?"

I nodded sullenly. "Hey, thanks. I appreciate it," he said, and turned back to join in with the rest of the club.

I felt certain I knew what he was going to say. He was going to kick me out because I couldn't fit into either style of dancing. While officially the club didn't require a person to choose which style of dancing they wanted to do, it was obvious that everyone eventually chose one or the other and stuck with it. There'd probably be two different clubs if the school hadn't told them that there was no way they'd approve the funds to maintain two separate modern dance organizations. I had been with the club for over three weeks and I still couldn't decide which style I could fit in with. The more intense style was too structured for me, but the more graceful side was too slow.

Eventually everyone left, and Dane and I were alone in the studio. I stood up and said, "Before you say anything, I want you to know that I understand that I've been a pain to put up with and that I know I don't fit in. I'll stop coming to practice and you don't have to worry about me being around anymore."

"What... what are you talking about? Why on earth would you think we don't want you here? You're really cool and everyone likes you. I was just going to ask you if there was a group you wanted to stick with. I've noticed that you switch almost every day between the two styles, and you're really good at both of them, but we don't have enough money to get both kinds

of costumes for you for our winter performance. I just wanted to see what group you wanted to perform with.”

Well, that made me feel stupid, which made me feel even more stupid when I had to confess to him, “I really don’t know. I’m flattered you think I’m good at both, but I don’t feel that way. It’s great exercise and it’s fun hanging out with you guys, but I don’t feel like I belong in one or the other. I think it would be good if I left anyway, so you don’t have to deal with me switching groups every couple of days and making room for me in the routine on the fly.” I turned around to leave, but he caught my arm.

“Wait. Just... stay for a few minutes. I have an idea. Are you willing to try to do something you’ve never done before?”

I sighed, frustrated. “Sure, I guess. Just for a few minutes, though.”

“Great! Okay, just gimme a sec while I set up.”

I set my bag down and watched as he thumbed through the CD case, looking for a particular disk. He found the one he wanted and loaded it into the stereo.

“Okay. Come to the center of the studio and close your eyes.” I did as he said, wondering if this was really going in the direction I felt it was.

“After I hit play, I just want you to dance however you want. While modern dance has a lot of basic moves that we use often, the whole point is that if you want to dance a certain way, you have the freedom to do so. Don’t think about keeping to one style or another – you can find a place in the middle, if you want, or dance in a completely different way entirely. Let yourself go and merge with the music.”

I opened my eyes and gave him an annoyed look. “Really? I feel like I’m in a bad eighties movie.”

He laughed at this in a good-natured way. “Okay, maybe I’m being a little cheesy, but we’re talking about art here. It’s okay to be cheesy. Just... close your eyes, listen to the music, and let yourself go.”

He hit play. I listened to the music. It was a song I had never heard before by some obscure alternative rock band. The music started out simple – just one guitar playing along to the lead vocals. Halfway through the first verse more vocals and guitars had joined in, and by the time to chorus started the full force of the band had joined in.

The song was cool, and I imagined that it would be really cool to dance to... if I knew what I was doing. Though my eyes were closed, I could feel Dane’s stare and I felt too much pressure to do well. All I could think of was trying to perfectly execute my favorite dance moves from both styles of dancing, and trying to come up with dance moves of my own in between so that it didn’t look like I couldn’t decide what dance I was trying to perform.

He stopped the music after the second chorus. I stumbled, pulling myself out of the middle of a particularly complicated move I was trying to make up on the fly. “What’s wrong? Is it really that bad?”

He was frowning, though more in a concerned way than an angry way. “I should ask you that. Is dancing really that bad for you? You did an excellent job coming up with a dance of your own, and each of your moves were executed beautifully, but your face looked more like you were getting a root canal. I’m not here to judge you, I just feel like you could get a lot of enjoyment out of this and something is holding you back. Can I suggest something?” I shrugged. “Take off your socks, wrist bands, even your hair band. Make it so you can feel the floor beneath your bare feet, your hair moving with each step, so that it really is just you and the music, no distractions.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “You want me to take all my stuff off?”

“Well, when you phrase it like THAT I sound like a pervert. I didn’t mean it that way at all, thank you very much. Just... anything you don’t need, put it in your bag, and we’ll try this again.”

I rolled my eyes, wishing that I had slipped out before Dane could notice me leaving. I did what he said, though, and stuffed my socks, rings, wrist bands, earrings, hair band, and even my pony tail holder in my bag. I paused when I thought of my necklace. Would it make a difference? I was afraid that if I took my necklace off my irritation with Dane would turn into anger, and that I’d say some things I’d regret. On the other hand, all I was going to do was dance. It’s not like I was going to pick a fight with him, right? I took my necklace off, but put it on top of my bag so I could grab it quickly.

I walked back to the center of the studio and closed my eyes again. Dane started the song over, and I listened even closer to the way the music flowed together.

This time I heard a drum beat that I missed the first time around. At the beginning of the song it was slow and deep, like a heartbeat. I breathed in and out slowly, willing my heart to match with the drum. The music picked up a little, and I started moving. I stepped into a dance move I was familiar with, but as the music changed, so did the dance step, and it ended up being something new entirely. I kept up this pattern until soon I wasn’t paying attention to using dance steps I was familiar with or what part of the song was playing – I was just moving to the music. It was intense, fast, but fluid. I felt like I was on fire... I felt like I *was* fire. This hot passion I never imagined having before started growing inside me, and spread until it was in each jump, step, turn, and kick I made.

The song ended, and I stopped dancing. I didn’t realize I was dancing so hard, but I found myself breathing heavily. I slowly opened my eyes and turned to look at Dane. His eyebrows were raised and he had propped his chin against his fist. He said nothing for a long time. I didn’t know what to do. Was it really that bad? Gymnastics had always been better for me because I knew that if I performed a certain way I could be highly competitive and difficult to beat in competitions. Maybe dancing was a bad idea.

He finally took in a deep breath and announced, “Well, that explains why you couldn’t choose a certain group to be in. You’ve taken the core of each style, completely broken them down, and mixed them together with a bunch of your own style of dance.”

I blushed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to destroy what you’ve built up at this club.”

“Destroy? No! You’ve shown me what this club could become if we all shared your enthusiasm! You show a passion in your dance that most of the girls that have been dancing since they were six are incapable of even beginning to understand. You were fantastic! Will you show your dancing to the club tomorrow?”

I was uncomfortable, unsure of what I did that impressed him so much, and I was also suspicious that he was just trying to flatter me. “Maybe. Don’t count on it, though.”

“Give it a serious thought, will you? Really, that was... wow. That is definitely not something to keep to yourself.”

I gave him a noncommittal sound that could be interpreted as either a *yes* or *I’m really not interested* and quickly put my socks and shoes on, throwing my necklace on as I rushed out the door.

I didn’t show the club my dancing the next day, or the day after that, either. Truth be told, it wasn’t that I was embarrassed by it – I was afraid. Something happened to me when I danced that dance. I couldn’t even describe it to myself, really. It was like... there was another person

inside me that woke up when I started dancing. She was a separate version of me – one that had wild passion that could only be expressed through dance. She took over while I was dancing, and disappeared when I stopped.

The scariest part was that I really *liked* this version of me. She didn't think, she just *did*. I didn't miss her – if anything, I felt lighter after she left as the dance finished. But I wasn't happy she was gone, either. It wasn't a decision I needed to make, whether I wanted her to be there or not, it was just matter-of-fact that she was there.

So the next week I decided to keep going to the dance club and to keep switching between each group every couple of days. I danced in the back, so neither group would have to worry about making room for me, and I worked hard on learning the routines so I wasn't dragging either group down, either. I told Dane that I wasn't going to perform at the winter show, so he didn't have to worry about getting me an outfit. He seemed upset, but I was firm about it.

That Friday Jack was again standing next to the bike rack, ready to walk me home. I wasn't going to say it out loud to anyone, but I was really happy he was there every Friday. The only time we had spent outside of school or walking me home was that few minutes the week before in the graveyard, when he made sure I made it home okay, but I really enjoyed his company. It was nice having someone there to talk about how I felt about the supernatural, and he had answers to boot. He mostly let me do the talking, but I enjoyed hearing him talk, too. He had a dry sense of humor that was hard to catch sometimes, but he was never rude or sarcastic.

This particular day he seemed distracted, though. He kept on asking me the same questions, as though he wasn't listening to my answers the first time I answered them. He was like that the whole way to my house, and when we finally reached my porch I couldn't take it anymore.

“What's wrong with you!? I feel like you haven't listened to a word I've said the whole way home!”

He looked at me, surprised by my outburst. “I apologize. I didn't mean to make you feel like that. I've simply had a difficult thing to think about.”

“A difficult thing to think about? What is that supposed to mean?”

“It's just that... you see... I just don't know how to...”

“For pete's sake, just spit it out!”

He cleared his throat. “The ghosts are having a gathering tonight. Some of the oldest ghosts in this area are going to be coming, so they've planned a party of sorts. They asked me to come... and they asked me to bring you with me.”

“Huh? Why me? How do they even know who I am?”

“You... gained a reputation that Friday a couple of weeks ago when you slew that abomination. A couple of ghosts witnessed it and word has spread that there is a human capable of slaying vampires. The fact that you and I are acquaintances only interested and amused the ghosts further. Gossipy bunch, really.”

“I didn't slay it. I held a lighter up to its arm. You were the one to keep it down while it burned.”

“But you were the one to burn it. It would not have burned to death had you not wanted it to.”

I started to retort, but paused to think about what he just said and how it echoed what my parents had said about Ammon. “So... you're saying I controlled the fire?”

“I assume so. Everything about you suggests that you did.”

“What about me would suggest that?”

“Makenna. I was born during a time when some people still understood the significance of names. Yours suggests that you have an affinity for fire. You were burning something in the cemetery before you were attacked. Your parents are wardcarvers, which means you’ve lived around magic all your life – there’s no way you can *not* pick up some sort of ability after spending that much time immersed in magic.”

“Oh. Well, that makes sense.”

“That, and you have quite the temper.”

I playfully punched his arm. “Watch it, before you really feel my wrath. I’ll go with you. You said ghosts are fun to be around, right?” He nodded. “Cool. What time should I sneak out of my house?”

“One o’clock. Will that be too late?”

“Nah. I can catch a power nap beforehand. See you tonight!” I let myself in my house and waved goodbye to him.

I’m not sure if it’s part of my personality that I don’t pay attention to everything people say, or if it’s just that I’m that dense, but it wasn’t until dinnertime that I realized that Jack had asked me out on a date. I nearly choked on my food when I realized this, and found that I had lost my appetite by the time I was finished coughing.

I couldn’t sort my feelings out about this, and ended up skipping my planned power nap. He seemed pretty hesitant to ask me... I wondered how much pressure the ghosts put on him to invite me. Does that mean he didn’t want to take me? But he could have said no to them. So does that mean he did want to ask me? Did he even view this as a date? I assumed so, since he took his time bringing up the subject. Maybe he knew that I would think of it as a date, and he didn’t want me to be uncomfortable.

I decided I had to let it go. He was becoming a good friend, and I knew that he was rational enough to keep in mind that his age was a good reason to prevent either of us from taking the date seriously, no matter how much my age he did look. Surely I was simply doing him a favor.

At midnight I decided to get ready. What does one wear to a ghostly soiree? A dress? Or would jeans and a tee do fine? Did ghosts even care? I’m assuming they never changed clothes, but my preconceptions of anything inhuman had been proven wrong many times over. I settled on a pair of dark skinny jeans and a light, gauzy, tunic-length top with a feather pattern on it. I put what I called my “rock star boots” on, and after fussing over my hair, I decided to just leave it down.

I snuck downstairs to go hop over the fence at exactly one o’clock. Though I hadn’t been in the house for long I already starting to know which stairs squeaked, which doors could only be opened halfway quietly. I didn’t need any lights to find my way, though I did bump into a corner to two on the way out. I was just about to open the door, when it opened up right in front of me. And there stood my parents.

Is there a word for that moment when two parties are so equally shocked to see each other given the circumstances that all they can do is stare at each other, openmouthed? Because that was a moment when I needed to have a word for it.

Mom, ever the forward one, broke the silence. “And where are you going at this late hour, dressed like that?”

“A ghost party. What were you guys doing?”

“Setting up protective wards for a ghost party.”

“Ah. So... it’s safe for me to go, then?”

A pause. Then a short bark of laughter from my Dad. “Well, you are bold, aren’t you? And how did you hear about this particular gathering?”

“I was invited by a half vampire I go to school with. He said the ghosts wanted me there because I set a vampire on fire last week.”

“Did you, now? Well, I think that if we were normal parents, and if you were a normal child, we’d forbid you to go, but we all know that neither of those is true. You really set a vampire on fire?” Dad sounded pretty impressed.

“Abomination, actually. It was pretty terrifying.”

“I can imagine. Well, we set up the wards ourselves, so I’m confident that you’ll be safe. This half vampire – how old is he?”

“Upwards of a couple centuries.”

“Does he have a sweet eye for you?”

“DAD. Do you really have to do this?”

“I just want to make sure that he treats you right! I can’t let my little girl get hurt!”

“...I can’t even tell if you’re joking or not.”

“Have fun. You know the only reason we’re letting you go is because we can keep an eye on your from our house, right?”

Great. I was going to a chaperoned dance. “Thanks, Dad. I appreciate it.”

“Ignoring the sarcasm, no problem. Do you have a lighter on you?”

“No. Why?”

“Because I’d feel safer if you had something to protect yourself with. Our wards can’t protect against every single little thing. Go get your lighter, and then you can go.” He patted me on the head. I rolled my eyes.

“Fine.” I dashed upstairs, grabbed my lighter, and headed to the backyard again. By the time I got back downstairs my parents were already gone, though I was going to assume they were going to be checking on me periodically.

I hopped the fence, straight into Jack’s arms. He set me down gently and said, “You’re late. Did you have problems getting out of your house?”

“I ran into my parents on the way out.”

He was wearing a dark, button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a pair of black slacks. “You look nice” I complimented.

“Thanks. So do you. I have to walk around the perimeter before entering the party. Would you like to join me?”

“Absolutely.”

We walked in silence for a minute as we made our way around the graveyard. As we neared the back of the cemetery I could see the ghostly party set up. In all honesty, it looked like a scene from a children’s movie - there were balloons, streamers, and tables with punch and finger foods on them. I wouldn’t be able to eat or drink anything, though - everything was a translucent green glow to match the ghosts themselves.

As we approached I asked, “What is this party for, anyway? It looks kind of like a big deal...”

“Today is a day of observance for ghosts to celebrate the blessing of the first visit of the Eldraif. Think of it like the ghosts’ version of the fourth of July. This year the celebration is being held at this graveyard for the ghosts in this region, so there will be some very old ghosts and very important guests attending, which is why your parents were asked to provide warding tonight.”

"Why do ghosts need to be protected? What could possibly harm incorporeal beings that are already dead?"

"Have you seen the movie The Exorcist?"

"Are you saying that they're afraid aged priests are going to crash their party?"

"No, but there are those that possess the ability to destroy ghosts, many of whom do not have a complete understanding of the nature of ghosts. The wards are set up to keep this gathering out of sight of those who would cause harm to the guests."

We walked on in silence a few more steps; not because I didn't have anything to say, but because I had a question that I wasn't sure how to word in a way that didn't sound rude.

"You have something on your mind." Jack said. Dang, he was good at reading people. Or maybe just me.

"Yeah... well, not to sound rude, but... why were you invited?"

"That is not a rude question at all. You're new to this world; I don't expect you to know the social conventions of the ghostly society. I mentioned a while ago that ghosts were a friendly bunch of beings; they do not have anything to lose and everything to gain, so they enjoy the company of as many that are willing to spend time with them. They are among the few in our world that admire what I do, so I was invited as a guest of honor. Well, that's what they say, anyway. I wouldn't say it to any of their faces, but I'm also sure that they invited me as security as well."

"How nice. And what about me? Am I... your date?"

Jack paused for a moment too long, which confirmed my suspicions. "I'm sorry. They were pestering me about it all week and wouldn't let the topic drop. I think they are entertained by the fact that I have found a companion of sorts. But they are also intrigued by the idea of a human that has an affinity for an element like you do. You are truly unique, and none of them have seen anything new for a long, long time."

"I'm not going to be asked to set anything on fire, am I?"

"I doubt it, though they will probably have lots of questions for you."

"Like what?"

"How you control fire, how long you've been able to, if you practice any sort of witchcraft - questions like that."

"Witchcraft? As in... am I a witch?"

"Yes."

"... umm... am I a witch?"

"No. You would know if you were."

"Good. I don't know the answers to the other questions, though."

For the first time since I met Jack, he didn't have anything to say to help me out. "Just... think back to when you set that abomination on fire. How you felt. Describe it to them."

"I don't want to think about that particular incident."

"Then make something up. They won't know if you are bluffing or not."

"I guess that's true. Thanks."

We finished our walk around the graveyard and moved to where the party was set up. There were only three or four ghosts there, but Jack assured me that there would be more arriving soon. He whispered to me that ghosts liked to fancy themselves members of high society and enjoyed being fashionably late. The ghosts that were there must have been hosting and immediately greeted us. They made polite small talk with Jack, but started trying to talk to me as soon as they felt it was okay to stop paying attention to him. Sure enough, I was almost attacked with

questions concerning my affinity for fire. Some questions were about my siblings and my parents, but I didn't have a lot of answers for them. At one point they started arguing with themselves whether I was a new kind of witch or if I was truly an incarnation of the element itself, which I used as an opportunity to slip away.

There was a table I hadn't noticed before set up for non-ghosts that had a bowl of punch and some little sandwiches. I grabbed a cup of punch so I had something to hold in my hands (and also something to drink from to give me a few extra seconds when I was asked a question I didn't know how to answer). I was just about to wonder if the table was set up just for me and Jack when someone stepped up next to me.

"Good evening, Miss Reyvens. I'm surprised to see you here."

I stared with my mouth open, unable to process the image of my chemistry teacher standing in a graveyard full of ghosts. I stuttered, "Mr.... Mr. Anders! Hi!"

He chuckled. "I take it you're surprised to see me here, too. May I ask what brings a sixteen year old human to a ghost party?"

"Jack invited me because some of the ghosts saw me set a vampire on fire, and they wanted him to bring me here. I have an affinity for it, I guess, and they find that interesting."

"An affinity for fire, huh? I've never heard of that before. Do you practice any witchcraft?"

"No, but my parents are wardcarvers, so I guess that has something to do with it."

"Impressive! Well, I'm honored to have the daughter of wardcarvers in my class."

"Yeah, now you're going to have an even more confused student in your class, since I won't be able to remember the difference between magic and science."

He laughed out loud at my quick comeback. "I can see that you truly do have a fiery personality!"

I held my hands up to my mouth in horror, realizing how close I had come to insulting one of my teachers. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! You're really a great teacher! Umm... with all due respect, what brings you here?"

"I'm the pack leader to a group of weres in the area. It's customary for me to attend local events like this."

"You're... a werewolf?" I couldn't help but glance up at the moon, just to make sure it hadn't changed to a full moon for no reason.

"I am, yes, though my pack is made up of many kinds of different weres. We have mountain lions, bears, and even a couple of large dogs. Judging by the look on your face, you haven't met a were yet - don't worry, we're not dangerous. Those of us that are older are mostly sane on nights around a full moon, and even those who are still young don't truly crave human flesh. Most of us became weres because we were too reckless while camping on the night of a full moon. Well, Gabriel has finally arrived, and I have some interesting research to share with him. Is this your first ghost party?" I nodded. "You'll enjoy yourself. Ghosts throw the best parties!"

He headed toward the direction of one of the ghosts that had just arrived, leaving me alone again to be attacked by more questions from even more ghosts that hadn't heard my story yet. I wasn't having a lot of fun, and was starting to doubt what Mr. Anders and Jack (who, by the way, hadn't bothered to find me again after the first group of ghosts accosted me with their questions) had said about ghost parties. Just as I was about to find a way out so I could go home, someone shouted, "the band's here!" And suddenly a stage appeared at one end of the area. All the ghosts rushed over to the stage, screaming and cheering when the band members appeared. The music started up, and I found out what Jack and my chemistry teacher were talking about - all the



ghosts started dancing. By themselves, in groups, with partners; there was no set form in which to dance. A couple of teenage girls danced over to me and encouraged me to join their group. I had never been to a club before, and wasn't really interested in school dances, so I wasn't sure how to dance in this setting (dancing socially is decidedly different from dancing on a stage for a performance), but they were persistent and I gave it a shot. I don't think they cared that I accidentally danced through them a couple of times, because they invited more ghosts over. Soon I found myself switching groups or partners every thirty seconds or so - and I'm not going to lie, it was pretty fun. I danced through four songs like that, just enjoying myself with this fun-loving group of beings. Some of the guys flirted playfully with me, even, and I may have flirted back.

After the fourth song ended, the band switched to a slow song, and the ghosts paired off. I felt a little awkward, knowing that I couldn't pair with a ghost, and moved back to the refreshment table in hopes I'd go unnoticed. Someone caught my arm, though, and I turned around to face what was possibly the most beautiful face I'd ever seen. I couldn't tell if they were man or woman, but the face was shaped so perfectly that it was easy for me to believe that maybe it didn't really matter. This person was tall - at least five or six inches taller than me - and as I stared into their face they gave me a smile that made my knees go weak.

"May I have this dance, Miss Reyvens?" He (thank goodness I could tell by his voice) asked. I nodded dumbly, and let him lead me to the 'dance floor', unable to take my eyes off his face. He took my hand in his, put his other hand on my waist, and got ready to take a step in my direction. I stayed planted to the ground, though, and he looked at me, concerned.

"I don't know how to waltz or anything like that," I croaked out.

He threw his head back and laughed the most perfect laugh I had ever heard. "Oh, don't you worry about that. Just follow my lead and I'll make up for what you don't know."

We started dancing again, and sure enough, he was able to keep me from stepping on his toes. I tripped on my own feet a couple of times, but he caught me and smoothly transitioned us into the beat of the dance again.

"My name is Nathaan-ell. I've heard much about you, Miss Reyvens, and I've been anxious to get a moment with you without all the ghosts pestering you with the same questions over and over. Are you enjoying yourself?"

I nodded. "I had no idea that ghosts knew how to throw parties like this. I mean, I was a little annoyed at first because all I thought they wanted to do was ask me about how I can control fire - which I'm going to be honest, I don't even think I can control it, not well anyway - and debate how I can do it and toss around the idea of me maybe being fire incarnate, which is kind of a scary thought, but I guess I shouldn't be too scared because I've been scared by so many much scarier things lately, I'm so new to this world of ghosts and werewolves and vampires and anything and everything I can imagine, and..." What was I doing? I kept rambling on and on about everything, but I couldn't help it. I just stared into Nathaan-ell's face and it was so beautiful and so *trusting* and I just wanted to tell him everything that came to mind, as though he could come to trust me, too.

I was interrupted by someone tapping on Nathaan-ell's shoulder. I was so annoyed that I shot whoever it was the most poisonous look I could muster. It was Jack, so I softened a little, but not too much.

"May I interrupt? I fear that I've been neglecting my *date* tonight, and I would like to make it up to her." Was there an edge to his voice? And did he really emphasize the word *date*?

Nathaan-ell sighed in the most longing way possible and said, "I suppose. Miss Reyvens, may I seek you out later tonight?" I nodded, perhaps a little too eagerly, and he smiled and parted, kissing my hand before letting go.

Jack quickly caught my hand before I could drop it and started dancing with me. He didn't try to force us into a classical dance, like Nathaan-ell - he just started swaying back and forth to the rhythm of the music. I looked over his shoulder at Nathaan-ell's retreating figure, distracted by the way he even walked perfectly. Jack spun us around so I couldn't face that way anymore, and I may have "accidentally" stepped on his toe,

"You don't want his attention," Jack said quietly.

"Why not? Who is he? He seemed like the most gentlemanly, chivalrous, perfect man I've ever met..." I gazed off dreamily, entranced even by the mental image of his face.

"He is a nice man, but I don't like seeing him try to woo you."

I was angry at that. "Why? Are you jealous that someone finds me attractive and wants to flirt with me? Is that why you made a big deal about being my date tonight?"

"Kenna, that's the prince of the clan of wood elves that live around here. He's not a bad man, but he pursues many, many people. If he sees a pretty face, he will try his best to woo that person until they fall for him. And yes, I'm being gender neutral on purpose. He uses his charm and beauty to his advantage, and I don't want you to get caught up in that. You're better than that."

My anger with Jack and my enamoredness with Nathaan-ell were quickly quenched. "Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't know... thank you for saving me from that."

Jack gave my hand a gentle squeeze. "Of course. You're the closest friend I've had in a long time. I would not want to see you get hurt."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. He didn't speak up again, either, and the song was still going. Before I could think too much about it, I slowly, tentatively leaned closer and rested my cheek on his shoulder and closed my eyes. For a moment I forgot about everything - the music, the ghosts, who I was, who he was, why I was there. I simply enjoyed being in the arms of someone who was becoming very close to me. Jack didn't do anything for a minute besides sway to the music with me, but then slowly brought our clasped hands closer to us, and gently kissed the back of my hand.

The music ended and I woke up to the real world again. I stepped away from Jack's embrace and stood there awkwardly. "Um. Thank you."

Another slow song started playing, but the spell was already broken. I moved toward the refreshment table again and waved Jack to come along with me. "Hey, point out to me the other non-ghosts here and tell me what they are and if they're going to hit on me."

Jack nodded and forced a smile. He followed me and as we snacked on chocolate-covered pretzels, he pointed out a goblin, a shape shifter, and a naga. None of them approached us, though they did look our way several times.

The dance music started up again, and again I was encouraged to go to the dance floor by the ghosts. I don't remember how many songs passed, but eventually I tired and had to excuse myself from the dance floor. I was followed by some of the younger-looking ghosts, and we started chatting, though not about me and my fire ability, thank goodness. They were teens that had died in the forties and fifties, and were interested to know what going to school and family life and being a teen was like for someone their age in a world half a century from their own.

No one saw *them* coming. No one would have said there was the possibility of them trespassing, not with my parents' wards. One minute we were all dancing and laughing and talking, and the next everyone was panicking.

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Seven ghosts "died" that night. Ghosts don't panic around vampires, because vampires don't have the holy power needed to destroy spirits. As it was, three vampires entered the party area and started running towards the densest group of ghosts. I didn't see what happened when they first arrived, but from what I understand, any ghost that the vampires ran through suddenly dissolved into the air. The ghosts should have started to at least go invisible once they saw the first two disappear, but no one except human holy men had the power to destroy ghosts, so they didn't comprehend what they were seeing at first. After the next three disappeared, though, panic quickly ensued. Soon all the ghosts were gone (unfortunately not quickly enough to prevent losing another two) and all that was left was me and the other non-ghosts. We were all at different areas of the party area, and couldn't band together quickly enough against the vampires.

Once the last ghost was gone, the vampires looked at the seven of us that were left, then settled their gaze on me. They started running towards me, and I turned around to run away from them as fast as possible. Everyone except the goblin started running in my direction to help fight off the vampires. Nathaan-ell had pulled out a long, curved sword, the naga had a dagger, and a wolf and a bear (presumably Mr. Anders and the shape shifter) were charging our way. Jack had been behind me, relative to the vampires, and was running towards me with his stake and knife already in each hand.

One would think that the battle would have been pretty easy with five against three, but the only one there that was prepared to actually slay a vampire was Jack. I shouldn't have stopped to watch, but I didn't want to leave and feel like a coward. I didn't want to leave my friend.

The three vampires were either very powerful or recently made; they looked like people, really, with no rotting flesh or hair falling out. There were two males and a female, and it looked like they had been very fit in life. Nathaan-ell and Mr. Anders were paired up against one of the males, Jack and the Naga were paired up against the other male, and the shape shifter was fighting the female.

I reached into my pocket for my lighter, wondering if they needed my help and if I would, in fact, be any help if I decided to join them. For all I knew I would just end up setting them all on fire. Just as I had my fist around my lighter, the female vampire scratched the shape shifter across the eyes and left the bear shaking its head, trying to reorient itself. This enabled her to turn her attention back to me, and she started running my way. She was very fast, so even though I tried to dodge out of the way, she managed to knock me back. I held my lighter up and tried to flick it on to conjure a flame, but it wouldn't take. The vampire pinned my arms down to the ground and bore her fangs. This was the first time I had seen a vampire bear its fangs, and was horrified by how long they were. Before I could scream out, she dug her teeth into my shoulder and started drinking. I couldn't scream after that, no matter how hard I tried.

I felt myself growing cold and tired. *This is it*, I thought. *She's not going to stop drinking. I'm going to die.*

Just as the edges of my vision started to get dark, I felt the vampire's body get flung violently away. I couldn't move my body at all, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Jack slashing at the vampire. Seconds later he was joined by the other four, and as soon as the vampire saw she couldn't win, she turned and fled.

Mr. Anders and the naga pursued the vampire, but Jack and the other two let her go and rushed to my side instead.

"Kenna. Stay awake. We're taking you to a hospital now. Nathaan-ell, her parents live in the house with the tall wooden fence on the other side of the graveyard. I'm worried that they don't know that their wards were broken. Let them know we were attacked and that their daughter is being taken to the hospital. Jen, will you scout ahead and make sure that there are no surprises waiting for us on the way to the hospital?"

I heard the bear grunt, and a second later a large, white barn owl rose to the air.

Jack pulled a vial out of his coat, unplugged it and poured the contents onto my wound. I drew a sharp breath at the pain – it felt like pouring hydrogen peroxide onto an open sore.

"Kenna, I'm sorry, I know that hurt. I'm going to have to do it at least once more before we get you to the hospital. It's going to help purify the wound."

He picked me up and started running to the street. Apparently my weight meant nothing to him, because he was running smoothly and soon we were at his car. He laid me down in the back seat and got a blanket from the trunk to keep me warm.

We were lucky enough to be within a couple of miles from the hospital. He must have pulled out a cell phone to call ahead, because I heard him say, "Can you get a gurney to the ER curbside? Yes, I know that only ambulances are allowed to pull up, but I have a girl that's lost a lot of blood. I'm already driving there; I need someone to be ready to take her into the ER. Yes, I'll be there within 90 seconds."

I heard him pull another stopper out from a vial. We screeched to a halt and he said quietly to me, "Once more, sorry, and then we'll get you into the ER and hook you up to some morphine." He splashed more of that liquid on my wound, then got out of the car to take me into the hospital. Sure enough, there was a gurney waiting for me, and he followed the doctors into the ER room to explain the situation. I was having a hard time understanding what everyone was saying clearly, but Jack did a good job saying what happened. We were at a party, he explained, and we were caught up in the silliness of the atmosphere and everyone tried to build up a furniture pyramid. It got too tall, too many people got on it at the same time, she was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and a chair fell on her head, with a couple of exposed nails puncturing her shoulder. She's been in shock ever since, and hasn't been able to move. Her name is Makenna Reyvens, and her parents have already been notified – they should be here shortly.

I had to admit, I was pretty impressed with this story. No one was to blame for the injury, no illegal activities were involved, and it explained why we looked so scratched up and why I couldn't move.

I was hooked up to an IV in no time, and while my adrenaline rush had passed and I wanted to pass out, the doctors wanted to make sure I was awake so they could check for a concussion.

After a whole bunch of tests, scans, shots and treatments, I was finally able to fall asleep.



When I woke up my head was throbbing and I was starving. I tried to stretch, but my arms were sore and hurt when I tried to move them too much. I saw Dad dozed off in a chair in the corner – no one else was in the room.

I didn't want to wake him up, but I was parched. I tried hoarsely calling out for him, but I couldn't make a noise loud enough to wake him up. Fortunately my mother walked in a couple minutes later, and came to my side. "Sweetie, how are you?" She grabbed one of those hospital water bottles with the long bendy straw and held it up to me so I could drink. I downed half the bottle before I felt like my throat could start working again.

"How long was I asleep?"

"About ten hours."

My dad had woken up and was now by my side as well. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty sore. It's hard to move. My arms hurt."

"You have some pretty nasty bruises from when the vampire pinned you down. Some vampires have paralyzing venom on their fangs, which it looks like this vampire had. It's probably still trying to work out of your system. Jack told us what happened. We're glad you're okay."

I leaned my head back into my pillow and closed my eyes. "So I suppose you're not letting me go to any more ghost parties, aren't you?" I meant it as a joke, but they didn't seem to pick up on my sarcasm.

"Well, that's the least of your worries. The vampires were trying to target you, specifically, and we don't know why. Going out late at night at all is pretty much off limits for a while. At least until we can figure out why they went after you."

I opened my eyes and looked back and forth between them. "What about your wards? I thought they were supposed to keep things like that away."

They looked worried (and maybe a little embarrassed?) and didn't answer right away. Dad spoke up and said, "The two vampires that Jack and the others slew had wards on them, too. But... they weren't good wards. They were made with the intent to harm. We have a theory that they were made as a sort of anti-ward, which is how they were able to get past our wards without us noticing. Some of them were also horrible, horrible perversions of dispelling wards, which were what destroyed the ghosts. Whoever made these wards knows what they're doing, and they obviously have some sort of plan. Maybe they want you for some reason, but we think it's more likely that they're trying to get to your mother and me."

"I think that vampire was trying to kill me or... or maybe even turn me. She would have drained my blood if Jack hadn't stopped her. Wait - I'm not going to turn, am I?" My heart stopped for a beat as I realized that I had no idea how long it would have taken for her to cast her spell or whatever it was that would turn me.

"No, you would have been dead by now if that were the case. Jack purified the wound with holy water so you wouldn't have to worry about anything evil infecting your soul, and he told us to make sure you drank some holy water at least once a day for the next week or so." Mom gave me a reassuring smile. "We really are lucky that Jack was there. He did a good job of taking care of you."

"Where is Jack, anyway?" I asked (hopefully I didn't sound too eager).

"He left, saying he had to figure out who turned those vampires and where the one that got away went. He was very gentlemanly - I can see why you enjoy his company so much." Dad winked at me as he said that.

"DAD! Seriously! Leave it alone!"

"I'm just sayin'. You should invite him over for dinner sometime."

"Dad, he's way old. I can't believe that you're trying to encourage this!"

"Encourage what? You two dating? Oh, heavens no! If anyone were to make the moves on my daughter, I'd string them up until they begged for mercy. He's a half vampire, though, and I want to make sure that any half vampire we meet knows that they're welcome in our home. You aren't thinking of dating him, are you?" His tone said he was serious, but he was smiling, so I didn't even know what he was trying to say any more. So I just ignored him.

"Mom, how long do I have to stay here?" I asked.

"Probably just until you can move on your own. Once you got blood back in your system, you were fine, physically. No signs of a concussion or tetanus or all that stuff the doctors wanted to check thanks to your friends' story."

I leaned back and started focusing on how much I could move. I tested out each limb and found I had good control, I just felt stiff. With my parents' help I got out of bed and started walking around. Once they were satisfied with my mobility, my mom left so she could check on Arvin and start dinner, and Dad stayed to check me out of the hospital.

Mom and Dad had told Arvin and Terra the same story Jack had told the hospital so there weren't a lot of questions at dinner, though Arvin and Terra did complain about how I wasn't in trouble for sneaking out of the house to go to a wild party. I assured them that I had no intention to relive that night any time soon, and I sincerely meant it.

I turned in early that night, and checked all the places that I knew my parents had placed wards to make sure they were there before getting in bed. I wasn't able to sleep soundly, instead waking up three or four times after having nightmares about everything going dark, then a shrill, high-pitched laughter coming from everywhere around me. The specifics of the dreams changed each time, but by the time I woke up, I had forgotten the details. The fifth time this happened I woke up and started crying. I was scared, but not because of the dreams. I was terrified that I could only have nightmares when I fell asleep, and what's worse was that every time I woke up I felt awful, like I was unclean, sick and empty. I felt like I had done something really awful, and the part of me that knew how to make things right was gone.

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER NINE

Sunday I chugged holy water all day (which, by the way, tastes like dirt), and was able to sleep marginally better. I still had nightmares that woke me up several times over the course of the night, but at least I couldn't remember them when I got up in the morning.

At lunch on Monday I didn't see Jack anywhere. I wasn't surprised, really, just a little disappointed that he wasn't able to get the mystery of the ghost party incident wrapped up over the weekend (and maybe a little disappointed that he hadn't tried to contact me at all, not even to make sure I was okay). I found Dani and Nobuko hanging out with Jennie and Nate. As I approached, Dani looked unhappy and said something to Nobuko, which made her look embarrassed. I sat with them anyway, and they were all polite to me, but it felt like Nobuko was the only one who was even feigning interest in anything I had to contribute to the conversation.

Once lunch was over Dani took off without saying anything to anyone. I tried talking to her before the starting bell rang for history, but she pretty much ignored me. She didn't wait for me to head over to the dance studio, either, and I walked alone to the club meeting. I purposely

danced in the ballet-based group that day so I could try and talk to Dani, and she hissed at me that I was distracting her.

Now I knew I could be dense but I wasn't THAT dense. She was upset at me and was trying to "teach me a lesson", or at least prove to me just how upset she was, so I purposely started packing up my gear before the club was officially over, just to make sure she wasn't going to be able to leave ahead of me.

I kept stride with her as she walked quickly – almost at a run - to her car. I caught her arm once we got to the parking lot and said, "Dani. What is your deal? I want to say I'm sorry for something because you're clearly upset at me, but I can't read minds and you need to tell me what it is I did that's making you so upset."

She set her jaw and glared at me. I did the same. She gave up first and said, "Listen, I hate phonies. I understand trying to find friends in a new city, and I was ready to accept that you had moved on from our friendship once you became all 'buddy-buddy' with Jack, but I don't like feeling like a 'backup' friend, and I don't appreciate how you tried to pick up where you had just abandoned me once your apparent soul mate didn't show up to school."

Ouch. I could be mean, but even that final sarcastic comment felt vicious. I felt bad, though, because I could see where she was coming from. "I'm sorry, Dani. I didn't mean to abandon you. I didn't realize how much time I was spending with Jack and how little I was spending with you. Jack and I have a lot in common, and he's been helping me out with some crazy things that have been going on in my life. But he's no replacement for a good girl friend, and you've been one of my best friends since I moved here. I don't think of you as a backup friend at all, and again, I'm sorry. Can I make it up to you?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I'm willing to put effort into our friendship, and I have been trying, I just don't want to keep putting in effort into a relationship that you're not willing to work on, too."

I nodded vigorously and said, "I understand completely. Do you want to come over to my house this afternoon and hang out for a bit?"

"Thanks, but I have some things to do tonight. Maybe later." She sounded doubtful, but at least it wasn't an outright no. "See you later, Kenna."

I biked home, starting to feel depressed. I didn't normally mind spending the afternoon by myself, but due to recent events I felt safer when others were around. The breeze was colder than it had been, and I could feel autumn approaching. How early did it start snowing in Colorado? The previous winter was pretty warm for the country as a whole, but that didn't mean we should expect another warm winter. I was going to have to find out where the bus stop was and when it stopped there so I could take it once it started snowing.

My thoughts dully continued on like this until I reached my house, when I noticed that my dad's car was already in the driveway. I cautiously entered into the house and called out for him.

"Kenna, is that you? I'm in the kitchen!" He replied, and I headed his direction. When I entered the kitchen it looked like he was cleaning something up off the counter. He saw the look of confusion on my face and explained, "Oh, I was cleaning a vase and accidentally dropped it. Apparently I'm pretty clumsy - this is why your mother handles all the fragile stuff while cleaning." He tried chuckling, but it sounded forced. He looked up to give me a smile, and I noticed that he had a black eye.

"What happened to you?!"

"Oh, I was reaching for a block of wood on a high shelf at work and it fell before I had a good handle on it. It's no big deal."

"Is that why you're home so early?"

"No, no, I'm fine. Actually, your mother was asked to take the place of a researcher who dropped out last minute on a trip to Germany where a bunch of medieval texts were found in a castle. I've got double parenting duty now and wanted to get a jump on cooking and cleaning so we're not eating at nine o'clock at night." I could tell he was trying to make a joke, but he looked really sad.

"Are you all right? Do you want any help?"

"Yes, I told you, I'm fine. Stop asking me questions. Just let me work on prepping dinner and I'll let you know when we can eat."

I wanted to stay, but his tone was very final; I needed to leave and that was that.

The house was uncomfortably silent for the rest of the day. I'm not sure how Dad treated Arvin and Terra when they came home, but judging from the way they didn't look up from their dinner plates I guessed that they had similar experiences to mine.

Arvin was the first to speak. "Why didn't mom say goodbye?"

"She had to make a flight on time or she wouldn't have been able to go."

"Is she going to call us when she gets there?"

"It's a very remote area. I doubt it."

"When is she coming back?"

"I don't know. As long as it takes."

"Is it going to be like a couple days or a couple weeks?"

"I. Don't. Know. She had a good opportunity come up, she had to make a quick decision, and she decided to leave. That's all." Dad was stern, and a little stressed. I started to feel a little afraid, because my parents had never acted worried in front of us, not like this. Every time they were worried about having to leave before a move, they were just quiet. They never snapped at us.

I was pretty depressed when I went back up to my room after dinner, and got super frustrated at myself when I realized that I had been neglecting Nobuko just as much as I had been neglecting Dani. I grabbed my cell phone and dialed her number.

"Hello?" She answered after a couple of rings.

"Hey, Nobuko! How's it going?"

"I'm doing fine. How are you?" She sounded super formal and pretty monotonous.

"Fine. Hey, listen, I just wanna apologize to you. I realized today that I've been a pretty crappy friend and wanted to let you know I haven't been purposely ignoring anyone. Especially you. I mean, I know I've been spending a lot of time with Jack lately, but a lot of it is because he's been helping me out with some stuff that's been going on."

"I see. Well, I'm glad you have someone you trust enough to help you with your problems." Her tone wasn't bitter, but the words were clear: she thought I didn't trust her enough to confide in her.

"Oh, Nobuko. It's so not what you're thinking. It's just that there's been some stuff going on with my parents and me and he's been where I am right now. It's really hard to describe, but... well, never mind. It's no excuse for me being a crappy friend and I really am sorry."

She sighed into the phone. "I'm glad you called. I'm not angry, but I've been spending time with Dani because she's the next closest friend I have, but I don't really like her that much. She gets angry about a lot of things that I normally don't get upset about, but she's so *infectious*. When you walked over to us at lunch she made a comment about you that was pretty mean. I realized that she was making me really angry at you when I didn't really blame you for anything



at all. I mean, I was upset that apparently you didn't want to spend time with me anymore, but if you found a boyfriend, then I'm happy for you."

"What?! No! Okay, first of all, he's NOT my boyfriend. He's a really, really good friend, but we're not dating. I don't even know where he is right now. Secondly, I love spending time with you. That's partly why I wanted to apologize - I realized that we really haven't talked much outside of class or dance, and I'd actually really like to hang out again sometime."

"I would like that very much."

"Great. Good. How about tomorrow?"

"Sounds great. What would you like to do?"

"Well... I haven't really thought about that. I'll think about it tonight. You think about something, too, and we'll talk about it at lunch tomorrow?"

"Okay. Hey, I have a question for you."

"Yeah?"

"Is it true you were in the hospital on Saturday?"

Uh oh. I was hoping that no one would find out what happened to me over the weekend.  
"Why do you ask?"

"I tried calling you on Saturday. Your Dad answered your phone and said you weren't available because you were asleep at the hospital. He told me that a vampire had nearly drained all your blood?"

"MY DAD IS SUCH A KIDDER! Ha ha! Oh man. You know, this happens wherever we move. My friends call and he'll take my cell phone from me and tell them the CRAZIEST stories!"

"He sounded pretty serious..."

"That's part of his humor! Like I said, he's such a kidder! Don't worry, you'll get used to it!" I hoped I didn't sound as hysterical as I felt.

"So... you weren't in the hospital?"

Crap. If I answered no she'd think I had been avoiding her. "Oh. Um. Well, I was in the hospital. But it's not a big deal. Some furniture fell on me and I lost some blood. It's really nothing to worry about."

"Are you okay?! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I really don't think it's a big deal at all. Really. Just... don't tell anybody, could you? I don't really want it to get out that I was in the hospital."

"Oh. Okay. Well, as long as you're fine."

"I am, yeah. See you tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'll see you in English."

I hung up the phone and fell back on my bed. I was trying to be a good person, really. I felt like I was failing, though, like something a part of me was just unable to function the way it was supposed to. I felt the worst for Nobuko - she was a pretty passive person as it was, but I couldn't tell if she accepted my apology because of that or if she was a genuinely faithful friend. I hoped it was the latter. I didn't need any more guilt over how I had treated my friends.

Even though I had a glass of holy water before going to bed, I had nightmares again, and these ones were really intense - even after I got up in the morning I vividly remembered dreams of being bitten all over by several vampires, and ending up covered in blood; or dreams of my family laying dead at my feet. I woke up several times during the night in a cold sweat, and desperately prayed to whoever would listen to make my dreams not true, and help me calm me down enough to fall back asleep.

The next day I failed to see Jack again during lunch, but tried telling myself that I would have spent the lunch period with Dani and Nobuko anyway. Dani was much nicer to me than she had been the day before, though when I invited her to hang out with Nobuko and me she declined, saying she already has stuff planned, dodging our questions when we asked what she was doing. But besides that, she was friendly, and we even walked into History class together.

While I wasn't expecting to see Jack there, I was surprised to see Mina. While she only showed up three or four days a week, I had a hard time seeing Jack letting her roam around the school without him there. She made sure to catch my eye as I found my seat, and gave me this poisonous smile and a wink.

I was suddenly very worried about Jack.

I went through the motions of the afternoon anyway, not wanting to give Mina the satisfaction of knowing I was worried. The worst was when she purposely passed by me very close as she left the classroom when the bell rang, so I could smell the heavy, smoky and honey-sweet smell on her - the same smell that was on the vampire that drank my blood.

I tried not to worry - after all, Jack was good at slaying vampires, and he knew a lot about the paranormal world, so I'm sure he was just... caught up in a mission or something. Then again, almost everyone had a better understanding about the paranormal world than me, and those vampires that attacked the party did seem pretty tough.

I was distracted during dance club and would have excused myself early if I hadn't made plans with Nobuko.

"Are you okay?" She asked as we were pulling out of the school parking lot in her car.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I'm fine. Why?"

"Nobody said anything, but you were dancing in the wrong group today."

"What do you mean? I was in the martial arts group today. You know, kicking, jumping, stuff like that. That's what I was doing, right?"

"Well... some of the time. Most of the time you were spinning and doing plies."

I felt my face turn red from embarrassment. "I'm so sorry. I've had a lot on my mind lately."

"What's going on? Or is this something that you can only talk to Jack about?"

"No, no. Um. I don't know where to start. My mom left for Germany and didn't even say goodbye to any of us."

"She left your dad?" Nobuko looked really worried.

"No, not like that. A really good opportunity related to her job came up and she had to leave very suddenly. It's just really weird, though, and I can tell that it's really bothering dad. Oh, and do you know Mina?" She nodded. "She's trying to torture me during class. Not, like, hurt me. But I think she knows where Jack is and I think he's in trouble, and she's trying to get me worried."

"Are you worried?"

"Worried? Me? No. Why would I be worried? He can take care of himself," I hastily replied.

She giggled a little bit, and I was irritated that she apparently found me funny. "You keep saying things to make it sound like you don't like him, but I think you really do."

I breathed an exasperated sigh. "Me liking him like that would be so complicated. I mean, really, really, *really* complicated. In a lot of ways he's my best friend, though, so... yeah, maybe I'm a little worried."

"I think you're repressing some amorous feelings..." She said in a singsongy voice.

"NO. And even if I was, I'm really, really good at repressing them." I left it at that and let my gaze wander out of the window. I had been avoiding thinking about the ghost party ever since I woke up in the hospital, mostly because I didn't want to think about the way I felt while we danced. I *definitely* didn't want to start analyzing the way he kissed my hand. Before I let my mind start analyzing my feelings, I changed the subject.

"So, are you going to tell me where we're going now that we're on our way, or is it really a surprise?" I asked.

Nobuko grinned. "Okay, I'll tell you. My parents said I can get a pet, now that we live in a house with a backyard and a basement. We're going to the exotic pet store!"

"No way! That's awesome! What are you going to get?"

"I thought about a ferret for a while, but I heard they were mean, so I decided on a hedgehog."

"Nobuko, you are the coolest person I know. Now I'm going to want a hedgehog!"

We parked at the curb side and went in to the store. It was the coolest pet store I'd been in, since it had all sorts of amazing creatures; hedgehogs, tarantulas, snakes, tropical fish, even prairie dogs. The owner assured me that the prairie dogs were really trendy, but I just didn't "get" it.

It sounded like a lot of fun at first, but things got really bizarre once I stepped next to the cages and tanks. Nobuko would look at an animal and beckon me to come close to it to check it out, but once I got close to the cage the animal would freak out. Hedgehogs are nocturnal animals so they were all sleeping, but when I got close the ones that were sleeping in the corner woke up, sniffed the air, then scuttled to the enclosed cubbies, trying to force the hedgehogs that were already sleeping there out. Those hedgehogs started panicking once they were forced out, and soon all the poor little creatures were trying to force their way in to the cubbies.

The store owner tried to tell us that they don't normally act like that, but we moved on to look at the other animals anyway. It turned out to be the same - the fish and the prairie dogs all tried to find cover, but the snakes started coiling up and hissing. One of the snakes even tried to strike out at us when we passed by, hitting its head on the glass and dizzying itself in the process.

Nobuko was really discouraged and we left without buying anything. She was nearly in tears when she started her car and said, "I must be terrible with animals. Did you see the way they acted whenever I got near them?"

"Don't look too much into it. I'm sure it was a bad day for them. If you come back next week they'll probably be just fine," I tried to reassure her. "You know, I actually have a school project I have to work on. Is it okay if we hang out more later?"

She nodded and took me home. We didn't talk much on the way there, mostly because I was feeling pretty bitter and she was still upset. I wanted so badly to tell her that it was me, not her, which caused the animals to act like that. I really, really hated to admit it to myself, but the fact of the matter was that when the snake tried to attack us I got that sick, unclean and empty feeling I had been feeling off and on since leaving the hospital.

What had that vampire done to me?



I stuck to my room the rest of the afternoon to try and avoid my family. I got all my homework caught up for the entire week and a couple of origami made, with the only interruption being another uncomfortable dinner. That night I had the same nightmares over

again and became even more sleep deprived than usual. I didn't know who to ask for help - Jack was gone, Mom was gone, and Dad was on edge. I really needed a bigger network of support, but who was I going to turn to? Mr. Anders? While I appreciated that I could talk to him, I didn't know how I was going to bring up the subject. And what if it was normal for Jack to disappear for days at a time? I would just end up embarrassing myself and continuing the perception that I had a thing for Jack. While I'm sure Nathaan-ell would be more than welcoming for me to turn to, I knew that it would be less to help solve my emotional problems and more to take me on as his current "challenge".

I had felt alone a couple of times over the last few weeks, but never like this. Before this it had been me just whining about all the new things I was finding out about myself and my family and the people or creatures around me. I was alone in that I was unique for a teenage girl, what with the affinity for fire and wardcrafting parents, but at least I had some people to talk to.

Now I was truly alone.



I almost stayed home sick from school, but Dad was insistent I go. If I wasn't showing symptoms of being ill, I wasn't going to wuss out of school because I was tired. The day passed almost exactly like the one previous, down to Mina showing up to class just to taunt me that Jack wasn't there; being unable to perform well during dance club; and an awkward family dinner. The only difference was that I was even more sleep deprived than before, and was snapping at everyone all day. As I tried to fall asleep I rubbed the metal charm on my necklace, anxious that I would have another night of terrifying dreams, and whispered out loud, "I don't think I can do this on my own."

That night I only had one dream, which started out as the memory of when Dane had me dance on my own. The difference was that he wasn't there, and the dance studio was dank and dark, with mold and slime growing in the corners along the walls. The mirrors were cracked, and the windows had heavy curtains over them. I was scared, but I danced anyway. Halfway through the song fires started at my feet wherever I stepped. I wasn't afraid, though - even though the whole dance studio was on fire by the end of the song, I wasn't getting burned. I stopped when the music stopped, looked around me, and willed the fires to die down. They gradually disappeared, and when the last fire was out the dance studio had changed: it was brighter, the floors gleamed as though they had just been waxed, and the walls were clean. The mirrors were fixed, and there weren't any curtains to keep the sunlight from streaming in. I looked at myself in the mirror - I was wearing a bright, gauzy dress that looked like someone wanted me to look like a flame. It had long sleeves that fit snugly on my upper arms, but were loose and flowy at the end. The bodice fit snugly, and smoothly ran into the knee-length skirt that was also loose and flowy at the hem. It was made of several layers of orange, yellow and red, and the skirt hem and the hems to the sleeves were cut irregularly, so whenever I moved it looked like a flickering candle. I don't remember if I said it myself or if it was my reflection that spoke to me, but I saw my lips move and heard the words, "I can help you."

I woke up that morning feeling slightly more rested, but was still on edge. Jack failed to show up again, and the fact that Dani was back to acting like nothing had happened and we were getting along fine was only barely notable.

I stayed through the entire dance practice. We were starting to come up with a solid routine for the winter show, and I felt an obligation to stick around for the whole practice, just so I

wouldn't feel like I treated the club lightly (even though I stood firm that I wasn't going to perform at the show when Dane asked me again to choose a group in which to participate). I took my time packing up, and asked Dane if I could stay behind for a few minutes, alone. He agreed, but told me to keep it to less than ten minutes.

I took off all my jewelry and accessories and socks again, flipped through the CD case to find an album with a good song, ended up choosing a random band I'd never heard of before, and hit play.

I didn't wait until I was at the center of the studio to close my eyes and start dancing. This time it only took a few familiar dance steps before I fell into my own routine. Though my heart rate was rising and I could feel myself start to sweat, I kept jumping, spinning, and kicking through two, then three songs. The music was there, but to me it seemed distant. I was dancing to the beat of the song my heart created, and all that mattered was that I was expressing through movement what my heart desired.

Near the end of the third song I opened my eyes to start to bring myself out of this trance, and almost stopped in surprise. In my reflection I was engulfed in flames. I kept dancing anyway since I didn't feel like I was on fire, and when I looked at my hands and feet they weren't actually on fire, but as I kept staring at my reflection the image persisted - I was engulfed in fire. I slowed down as the song ended, and the flames I saw slowly extinguished as my dance came to an end. When the last flame disappeared, I got this overwhelming sense of... well, several things. I felt clean, warm and, most importantly, complete.

I fell on my knees and started crying into my hands in relief - *this was my outlet*. I let all the stress I had been trying to suppress over the last few days surface and vent out, because while figuring this out didn't solve any of my immediate problems, I finally felt for the first time in my life that I was in control of something. Dane knocked on the door and let himself in when I failed to answer. When he saw I was crying, he rushed to my side and knelt next to me. "Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself? Kenna, what's wrong?"

I sniffled, wiped my tears away, looked up at him and smiled. "I'm fine. And you know what? I mean that - I'm actually doing okay. I just... I finally figured something out that I didn't think I'd ever have an answer to, and it's such a relief. Sorry to keep you after, I'm done now."

He grinned. "Did you dance? Really, truly dance?"

I nodded. "I think I needed to do it just for myself."

"Would you be willing to show the rest of the club now?"

I thought about it for a moment. "You know what? I think I can do that. I don't think I can teach anybody, per se, but I can show them."

He chuckled. "I don't expect anybody to really learn what you do, but we can come up with some moves, I think."

He helped me up off the floor, and grabbed my bag for me. "Do you want a ride home?"

"I rode my bike, and I don't really want to keep it here at the school."

"I have a truck, it won't be a problem to throw it into the bed."

"Well then, I suppose I don't really have an excuse to say no, do I?"

"I was going to hold your duffel hostage until you said yes anyway."

"Now what has my duffel bag ever done to you?" We walked to his truck and continued on like this. Was he flirting with me? More importantly, was I flirting back?

Apparently I was, because when Dane unloaded my bike after pulling up to my house, he held onto it tightly instead of letting me take it and said, "Kenna, there's this really cool ski resort up in the mountains... it's not really busy now since there isn't any snow, but the trees should be

turning colors right now and there's a couple of hiking trails that should look really cool with the trees looking the way they do. If you like hiking, I'd like to take you there this Saturday, and maybe stop by this awesome cafe after that. Are you free?"

He was charming, easygoing, and, admittedly, very good looking. Even though he spent his afternoons dancing, a stranger would probably peg him more as a surfer - sandy blonde hair that he let grow out just long enough to cover the tops of his ears and the back of his neck, bright blue eyes, and dimples in both cheeks when he smiled. Most importantly, he was normal.

"Sounds like a date!" I said with a smile, and took my bike from him.

While the evening with my family started out not much different than it had been the rest of the week, I felt full of positive energy and wanted to spread it to my siblings and father. I was chatty all during dinner, telling jokes and talking about meaningless things. I think I cheered them up a little, because when I suggested that we watch a dumb comedy they all agreed. Dad didn't laugh at all during the movie, and even left halfway through, but it was the most time we had spent as a family in what felt like had been a long time.

All in all, it had ended a really good day. As I lay in bed that night I touched my neck to grab my necklace, only to find it was gone. I got up in a panic, wondering if it had fallen off at one point. I searched all the spots I had been in the house that afternoon, even getting Terra (who was still awake doing homework) to help me. We scoured the kitchen, living room, hallway, bathroom, and my room to no avail. We sat on the floor of my room when she asked, "Did you take it off at one point today?"

As soon as she said that, I knew what had happened. Sure enough, I checked my dance bag and my necklace was still in a side pocket. I apologized to Terra for freaking out and shoed her out of my room. I sat on the edge of my bed and smiled to myself as I turned the pendant over in my hand. I had gone all afternoon without wearing the necklace, and I had never once lost control of my emotions.

Joining that dance club was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

[\*Back to top\*](#)

## CHAPTER TEN

I slept deeper that night than I had all week, and when I woke up on Friday I was set on making sure that nothing would bring me down, not even that bitch Mina and her constant taunting.

I made last-minute plans to drive to the city with Dani to hang out with her and a girl named Alexa, who was best friends with Dani in middle school but had moved right before they started high school. I felt like a third wheel for the first couple of hours of shopping (apparently Alexa needed help from Dani to pick out an outfit to wear to a wedding), but once we were done we headed downtown to pretended to be tourists and I felt more comfortable goofing off with them. We ate at a little hole-in-the-wall Chinese place that had the best won ton soup I had ever eaten, and ended the evening by seeing a kung fu film at the university's theater.

Dani and I talked and laughed all the way home. She assured me that Alexa really, really liked me and that we should totally all hang out again. It was nice to know I was back on good terms with her and was thrilled when she said, "Courtney is holding a pool party at her parents' house tomorrow afternoon. Her parents are loaded and it's a heated pool with a waterfall and everything. Do you wanna come?"

"Aw, man, thanks so much for inviting me. You have no idea how much I appreciate it. But I actually have a date tomorrow afternoon. If there are any other parties, though, let me know and I'll totally come."

Dani gave an excited squeal. "Oh my gosh! You have a date?! How exciting! Who is it with?!"

"Dane. He took me home yesterday and asked me to go on a hike with him tomorrow." Her reaction couldn't have been more different than how she had reacted a few seconds earlier. She was still smiling, but it was so forced that I would have felt better if she had been frowning. All the excitement was gone from her voice and she said, "How nice. That's super nice. Dane is a really nice guy. I know he'll take you out on a really nice date."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, why?"

"Never mind." I don't know what had changed, but I wasn't going to argue with Dani again, not since we had only just gotten back on good terms. We drove the rest of the way home in silence, and the only thing she said to me when she dropped me off at my house was a bitter, "I'll see you Monday."

The next morning I had butterflies in my stomach. I wasn't the most popular girl in school in San Francisco and had only gone out on one date once before moving, and it was in a big group for a Sadies Hawkins dance, so I didn't really count it.

Dad was doing a good job pulling double parenting duty, even though it stressed him out. He had breakfast ready to go by nine, and even though he wasn't that great at cooking on his own it wasn't that bad. I noticed as he was cleaning up the cooking area that he looked like he hadn't gotten any sleep. Worse than that, even. His hair was all mussed up and the skin around his eyes was all droopy and dark. The skin around his mouth was turning dark, too, and I wondered if that was a side effect of losing sleep. Not having mom around was really taking a toll on him.

I rinsed my dishes off and put them away, and made sure to give him a hug and say, "It's Saturday. Get some rest. You're doing a good job, Dad."

He said something to himself as I turned the corner out of the kitchen. I didn't want to say for certain what it was, but it sounded something like, "No, I'm not." Poor dad. I resolved to make dinner as often as I could until Mom got back. Hopefully that would help.

I had managed to carry my happiness buzz from the day before over into my morning. I had never, ever felt so *emotional* before. The wards my parents had made for my necklace were able to keep my emotions and temper in check, but in a way that made everything seem so dull. It was like I had been living my life in a film that had a sepia tint to it, but now the filter was gone and everything seemed bright and vibrant. I pushed my bed aside so that it was in the corner of my room. This cleared up enough space in the center of my room that I could try to dance without worrying about knocking anything over or running into my furniture. I found one of my favorite rock albums and turned it on to a random track. Even though it wasn't the same as dancing in the studio, I could have danced for the whole CD and had to stop myself so I didn't risk tiring out. I needed to keep some energy as I was going on a hike later.

Now that I knew that dancing was what helped maintain my balance between fire and being a sane human being, I had this energetic buzz when I was done. I was so happy to have found this outlet and nervous about my date with Dane and sad that mom was gone and dad was stressed out and angry at Jack for just disappearing and letting Mina taunt me, and I felt all these things at once but I didn't feel the need to do anything about it, I was just able to choose to feel happy and a little nervous and let the other emotions be there, just sitting in the back of my mind,

out of sight. As I packed up my backpack with trail mix and water for the hike, I grabbed my necklace, thought about putting it on, but stuffed it in a side pocket instead. I'd put it on if I felt I needed it, but I doubted it.

Dane picked me up at noon and we took the main highway into the mountains. It was about an hour long ride, but it passed by quickly. Dane and I got along so well - it was more like talking to someone I had known since I was a little kid rather than someone I had hardly spent any time with.

As he promised, the trail was gorgeous. The aspen tree leaves had turned a bright yellow, and paired against the white bark of the trees themselves it felt like we were walking through a tunnel of pure golden light.

"What are you doing when you graduate?" I asked at one point.

"I'm not sure," he chuckled nervously. "I know I should have already been applying for colleges, but I'm just not interested in earning a degree. I got this job over the summer and I realized that I really like doing hands-on work so much better than studying. My grades this year suck, and I just have a hard time caring. I do well in English, and that's about it. Maybe I'll find a job or go to trade school or something."

"What was this job you worked?"

"I worked at an antiques restoration and custom furniture store. There was a job fair at the end of school last year and this man hired me and a bunch of other kids to learn the trade over the summer. I know it doesn't really sound exciting, but we found so many cool old things, and did a lot of really unusual custom jobs. This man said that I have a really natural talent for it, and even offered to pay me really well if I quit school and did an apprenticeship with him. Can you believe that you can actually do that anymore? You hear the word apprentice and think of medieval times, but I guess there's a lot of people who go into crafting trades that don't have a complete education and are really successful. I declined, obviously, but even though I don't work there now I'm studying the craft and practicing in my free time so I can go back next summer and maybe get a permanent decision. It was just really satisfying, seeing how our work made others so happy, and ever since I saw the way that something I made brought someone such great happiness, that's what I've wanted to do. It wouldn't pay well, but I don't really want to live in high society. I just wanna be able to pay rent, is all." Wow. I loved that he knew exactly what he wanted to do - could he be any more ideal? "So what about you, Kenna? I know you still have a little bit to go before graduation, but you're probably thinking of taking the SAT this year and applying for colleges and stuff, right?"

I didn't answer right away. I stopped, and turned my face up to the sun, feeling its warmth. I laughed in delight when I realized that the sun was really just a giant fireball, and opened my arms to welcome it into my life as my brother.

"You know, if you had asked me this time last year I could have told you without a doubt what I wanted to do. My plan was to graduate with at least a 3.5 GPA and an SAT score good enough to get me into a really good university. I was going to study law and go back to San Francisco to become a lawyer for those that society discriminates against - minorities, women, gays and lesbians. Everyone has the right to be happy and I imagined myself as their knight in shining armor."

He gave me this strange look. I frowned, wondering if I said something that offended him. "Well, here I was thinking I was a good person for doing something useful regardless of what it pays. You want to better yourself AND the world. I can't compete with that." I was worried



until he smiled, showing me he was kidding around with me. "So what changed? How would you answer that question now?"

We started hiking again. "I discovered the world is much bigger than I thought it was. I feel so insignificant and helpless now, and know that there are people impacting the world in a way I can't possibly compete with."

"You don't really believe that, do you? I think you're an amazing person and that you're capable of great things."

"Ha. Thanks for the compliment, but no offense, you don't really know me that well."

"I'm really good at reading people, though, and I can assure you, I know that you're not a normal girl." I looked at his face, trying to read what he meant by that. He couldn't possibly know, could he?

"What, NOW you're upset that I'm paying you a compliment? I just mean that you're really passionate and interesting, and I'm sure that whatever you decide to do, you'll be the best at." Oh. Good. He was just flirting with me - he hadn't found out about my fire affinity or my parents. I was relieved - I was enjoying being a normal girl on a date with a normal boy.

The hike was only about forty minutes long, making it more of a nature walk than a hike. The trail ended at a waterfall, and we stopped to take pictures in front of it and drink some water. As we sat and admired the surroundings, Dane said, "Places like this give me hope for the planet. There are too many people and even our little city I feel like we just completely disregard the fact that we're destroying our environment."

"Oddly hippie-like views for someone that drives a gas-guzzling pickup truck," I jokingly observed.

He shrugged. "My parents bought for me. But it's the truth - Mother Nature is a powerful force, and I hope one day the people that have been harming her pay for what they've done."

"I think hoping for vengeance is a little extreme, don't you think?"

"You don't think that this world could do without some of the people in it?"

"My parents raised me to believe in balance. I accept the evil in the world because I can recognize the good in it. I can do my best to contribute to the good, and encourage those that fight for good to keep doing what they're doing, but it would be unrealistic to believe that we can get of all the bad in the world. And... I dunno. Some bad things have happened to me lately, and I think that if I hadn't gone through them I wouldn't appreciate the good things in my life right now as much. Like being here here with you." I blushed and looked sheepishly at the ground at that last part.

"Hey," he said quietly to get me to look at me again. Before I could react, he quickly leaned in for a kiss. It was soft, chaste, and, to be honest, I was a little disappointed at how short it was. He looked me in the eyes and said, "Being here with you makes me happy, too."

We hiked back mostly in silence - not because it was awkward, but because we were happy to just be with each other. Our conversation picked up again when we arrived at the cafe, and we talked about everything that came to mind. One minute we'd be talking about politics and ten minutes later we'd be laughing about the playground games we played as kids. We were there for hours and had to keep ordering pastries and drinks even after we finished dinner so we wouldn't be kicked out.

Dane dropped me off at home and walked me up to the doorstep. "Thank you for taking me out today. I had so much fun." I gave him a kiss on the cheek (I was not quite as bold as he was for a first date), and let myself in the house before he could make a move on his own. Through the screen door I bid him goodnight.

"You sleep well tonight," he said. "And... I'm not the kind to play the game of waiting a couple of days before calling you again. Can I take you out again soon?"

I grinned like an idiot. "Absolutely."



I was walking on air all the way through Monday afternoon, despite how coldly Dani treated me and the fact that Jack didn't show up again. During dance I had more enthusiasm for the routines than I had ever had before, and was actually considering changing my mind about performing at the winter show.

Practice ended and Dane announced, "For anyone that's interested and able to stay a few extra minutes, Kenna has a new kind of dance to show us." Almost everyone stayed, and suddenly I was nervous. Was I really ready to share this with anyone else?

The music started, and I had a hard time getting lost in the dance, sticking instead to dance moves I was used to. I was nervous that they would judge me, that Dane was just flattering me because he liked me, and that the others would see the flames in the mirror that I had seen that first day by myself. I closed my eyes and reached out for the girl dressed in the flame dress. Am I going to be okay? I asked.

Yes, she said. Would you like me to help you?

Yes.

She took over. I slipped into the music and danced my fire dance. It was only half the song by that point, and Dane stopped the CD before it rolled into the next song. I opened my eyes and looked at the group that had been watching. Some of them were smiling; some of them had their mouth open in shock. Someone started clapping, and soon everyone was applauding my performance.

Dane walked over to my side and faced the group. "Now, you all are more than welcome to say no, but I look at this dance and think it would be an excellent addition to our winter show. How would you feel if we had a routine or two featuring Kenna?"

No one answered at first, then slowly everyone started chiming in. The response was overwhelmingly positive, with the exception of Dani, whose face was quickly turning red. She quickly picked up her bag and walked out the door.

"Great!" Dane said, apparently not noticing Dani leaving. "Now, I don't know how many of us can learn to dance quite the way she can, but I bet Kenna can teach us some moves that come close enough to provide some decent backup dancing. Would you be willing to do that, Kenna?"

"Umm... wow. Are you going to let me say no to the routine?" Dane and about half the people in the club said no almost simultaneously. "Well, I guess I'll have to then, won't I?" I tried to front nervousness, but secretly I was thrilled. We worked out as a group who would be in my routines and when we would start practicing them. It would only be once a week, but Thursday would become a new "official" practice day for the routines.

As we dispersed I caught up with one of my dance mates, Sonia, as she walked to the parking lot. From what I could tell, she was a pretty close friend to Dani. "Hey, can I ask you an awkward question?"

"Sure, shoot."

"Dani's been pretty distant to me lately and she seemed really upset just now. Do you know what's wrong?"

Sonia gave me this pitying look. "Listen, I'm Dani's friend. I'm not going to blab her secrets to you if she doesn't want you to know them. You should ask her yourself."

"I want to, and I've been trying, but she's been ignoring me and trying to run away from me. I just want to understand what it is I did so I can apologize."

"You really can't figure it out?"

"No! If I could figure it out, I wouldn't be asking you for help!"

She sighed. "Fine. I don't want to give away too many specifics, though, and you didn't hear this from me, okay?" I nodded. "Dani has a huge crush on Dane, and she's been working to get her own routine for a performance ever since she helped form the group freshman year. Since Dane's a year older, when he joined he just fell into the role of leader and never gave her to opportunity to have a solo. Didn't make her like him any less, though."

"Well, I don't need to have my own performance. I'd be more than happy to give that opportunity to her."

"In my own opinion, our show needs you. But I can see how some people would think that you're only getting it because you and Dane are going out."

"I... we... I wouldn't say THAT, necessarily..." I stuttered.

"Oh, please. First of all, everyone knows you went out with him this weekend. Second of all, it's so obvious that Dane has had a crush on you almost since you joined the club. The only reason he didn't ask you out sooner is because you were spending all your time with that Jack guy."

Ouch. I sighed despondently. "Okay. Well, thanks."

"Yeah. And remember, you didn't hear any of this from me." We had reached her car. As she was about to get in she added, "By the way, I meant what I said. Your dance was really awesome and I think you should definitely have your own routine at the winter performance."

Dane was waiting for me back at the bike rack. "Do you want a ride home?" He asked.

"Thanks, but I think I wanna just ride my bike home today."

He was obviously disappointed. "Are you sure? It's not a problem, you know."

"Yeah, I'm positive. I'll see you tomorrow."

When I got home I ran straight up to my room and called Dani right away. It went to voicemail. I hung up called her again, and when it went to voicemail again I realized that she was probably screening her calls. I left a message.

"Dani, it's Kenna. I just wanted to say I figured out why you're upset and I wanted to apologize. Call me back when you get this."

Dani called back within five minutes. She didn't even say hello and went straight to, "Do you really think you know why I'm upset?"

"I'm pretty sure. I didn't realize that you wanted your own dance routine, and I'm sorry I was so dense that I didn't see you liked Dane. I can try to convince him to give you the routines instead. I don't want them if it's going to upset you." She was quiet for long enough that I had to check my phone to make sure I hadn't accidentally hung up. "Dani?"

She sighed a deep, long sigh. "You deserve the routine."

"It means a lot to me to hear you say that" I replied. "And... I'm sorry about Dane. I didn't realize that you liked him."

"That's okay. I'm sure that the date was just a one-time thing, right?"

"Well... he actually asked me out again when he dropped me off from our first date."

"Did you say yes?"

"Yeah." Dani was quiet again. "Listen, Dani, this was before I knew that—"

She didn't let me finish, instead hanging up before I could get another word in.

I laid back and just stared at the ceiling for a while. I felt bad that I hurt her, but at the same time I didn't really feel like she should be quite so angry. It wasn't like I made Dane ask me out. And Dane and I got along so well. She should be happy for me that I found someone that makes me happy. I shouldn't have any sort of obligation to shut Dane out just so that Dani could feel better.

I got up off the bed to go do something before I could make myself needlessly angry at Dani. I headed to the kitchen to get a snack, but heard an unfamiliar voice coming from the living room as I walked down the stairs. I quietly walked back to the top of the stairs and listened to the conversation going on.

"-there anything you can do?" My dad's voice drifted up the stairs.

"Listen, the most you can do - the most we can ALL do - is wait and hope for the best. Are you sure you don't want the help of one of my students?" The other man's voice was deep and rough. I didn't like it at all.

"I can do this. Really. I just need to figure out how to do it without hurting anyone..."

"If you over think it you could cause even more harm than intended. Don't look at me like that - I'm just telling you the truth. Honestly, even an idiot could take one look at you and tell that something's not right."

"I'm being careful. All I need to do is get through this as quickly as possible so Lucie can come home. Once she's back I'll be fine again."

The stranger sighed a deep, exasperated sigh. "I don't like this. I'm only helping you out of respect, you know. Here are the materials you wanted. You should come back to the school once in a while, I think it would help. And I'm serious - I really think you should have one of the students helping you out. I don't believe in 'balance' or whatnot the way you do, but you obviously take it very seriously. I'll see you later, Geth."

I moved to sneak back to my room, but Dad had gone straight to the base of the stairs and noticed me. "Kenna! Were you listening in on my conversation?" He snapped.

"Just the last part about you going to the school! I wanted to get a snack but I heard you talking to someone and wasn't sure if it would be rude to interrupt..."

Dad looked straight into my eyes as though to see if I was hiding anything. His face softened after a few seconds and he said, "I'm sorry I snapped at you. I just didn't hear you come in from school and was surprised to see you there."

"It's okay. Can I ask who that was?"

"That was Calvin Briggs, the man I told you about that runs the wardcarving school. He was bringing by some materials for me to work on since I'm doing so much from home now."

"You know, if you need help around the house you can just ask me and Arvin. I know he's not here often and I stay at school for a little bit every day, but I think that being here all the time is causing you too much stress. You constantly look really tired all the time now."

He shook his head. "No, I need to be working by myself right now. But thanks for being concerned about your dear ol' dad."

I walked down the stairway and gave him a hug. "No problem."

I later woke up in the middle of the night with a horrible realization. It had been way too easy for me to lie to Dad about how much of the conversation I overheard, and I didn't just mean in the way that most teens lie to their parents to stay out of trouble. I remembered how difficult it was for me to tell my parents a harmless, made up tale that day they told me the truth about being wardcarvers, and it occurred to me that I felt no sort of resistance like that while lying to

my dad. I grabbed my cell phone to use as a flashlight and headed to the top of the stairs. I inspected the banister closely, where Dad had started carving the wooden posts holding up the banister after mom left. They had every design I had seen carved into the wood items in our home, but there was no order to them, and each design was carved in a different style than they had been carved in to all the other furniture in our home. They looked spikier, more stretched out, and much more elaborate than the others. I was no wardcarver, so I didn't want to come to any definitive conclusions, but I got the distinct vibe that these were meant to perform the functions that the rest of the wards in our house were supposed to, but they were just... off. Like they were given a set of instructions written in a language they only half understood.

I looked for my parents' seal, hoping that there was no way these wards would be sealed in the way they looked now. It took the better part of a half hour, but I found it at the base of only one post near the top of the staircase. I could see that my dad had carved in their seal, but it was wavy looking and there were shallow scratches that indicated someone - possibly my dad? - was frustrated with it and didn't want it to be there anymore.

I reached out to touch the seal and whispered, "What's going on?" As soon as my fingertip touched the carving, I felt a jolt of energy rush through my body and felt this overwhelming sense of sadness and loss. I pulled my hand back and those feelings disappeared.

I was confused and, admittedly, rather afraid. I went back to my room and sat at my desk to start drawing on origami paper.

I started on the edges with round thick lines. What was going on with dad?

I drew medium-sized branches coming off the first lines. From what I could piece together, dad was in trouble and it had to do with mom being gone.

With a thin, ballpoint pen, rounded leaves unfurled from the branches. Mom was not gone on a research trip to Germany, of that I was ninety percent certain. She must be detained somewhere, judging from Dad's statement about his needing to get a job done so she could come home.

More thick lines, curved and tangled, closer to the center but still leaving a blank hole in the middle. Was dad working on carving wards on his own? He must be, and that must be why Calvin Briggs told him to take on a student to help him out. The banister was the first thing Dad started working on after Mom left, but I had assumed that he was carving wards he and mom had already established as "safe" wards. It was possible that he was trying to modify the wards so they had a different effect than the other ones.

Tiny, delicate ovals in the center of the sheet. Mom and dad talked about how trying to carve wards for an impure purpose caused corruption. I doubted that dad was purposely carving impure wards, but it was possible that he was unintentionally corrupting the wards by over thinking them. Did corruption change the physical appearance of a person? If so, that could be why Dad was looking so dark around the edges.

I finished the drawing. As a whole, it looked like some modern-deco stamp of birds' eggs in a nest sitting in a tree. A hummingbird seemed like an appropriate fold.

Fold the sheet side to side, corner to corner. Who was holding mom hostage and forcing dad to make something for them? This wasn't the first time mom and dad had been targeted for their abilities, but it was the first where they weren't able to get away. It had to be someone who knew how to get around the wards protecting them and past the people who were keeping an eye on them. It was probably the people that had sent the vampires after me, as the vampires had anti-wards on them. Mina made the vampires, I was positive of that. But she didn't have any anti-wards on her, or at least none that I could see and none that Jack was aware of. I didn't know her

too well, but my impression of her was that she wasn't the mastermind type. She relished chaos, not order. It was probably someone else.

The bird was finished. I had gotten all my thoughts in order, but I was unsatisfied with how little I had pieced together. It was like I got the edges of a thousand piece puzzle done, and all the pieces that looked like they were part of the same part of the picture separated, but I had no actual picture to reference. I hung up the bird and wondered how I could possibly help. I wasn't going to ask dad. While I felt like I could handle the truth, he probably was just trying to protect me. I was afraid that involving myself would just get him in more trouble.

I had been trying to keep Jack off my mind as much as possible, but I really, really wished he was there to tell me what to do, or maybe find my mother for us. I also wished that he could just be there for me as my best friend.

I sat at my window to see what was going on in the graveyard that night. Nothing too exciting happened, just a few ghosts talking to each other. I fell asleep at the window and slept fitfully until morning.

[\*Back to top\*](#)

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next day I realized that Dani viewed our friendship as pretty much non-existent. She purposely sat on the opposite end of the classroom that we normally sat at, and at lunch Nobuko and I couldn't find her anywhere. She stopped showing up to dance practice altogether, and I took her place in her dance group for the winter show. I tried to tell myself that I was fine with that, but the only time I could really believe it was when I was with Dane.

Over the next few weeks we entered fall, then the beginnings of winter, but life itself didn't change much. I tried my best to come up with dance moves to teach the four girls that were chosen to dance with me, and every Thursday we worked on the routine we'd perform at the winter show. It was decided that I'd be featured in two dances - one on my own, somewhere in the middle of the show, and one as the finale with the other four girls. I didn't feel I was so good at dancing to deserve two numbers of my own, but Dane and about half the club insisted that it was absolutely necessary.

I spent time with Dane almost every day, and Friday became our unofficial date night. He was a wonderful gentleman, too – he never once got touchy, and while he was a fantastic kisser, his kisses were always sweet, short and simple. We never ran out of things to talk about. We agreed about how silly the stereotype was that all people from Colorado wear cowboy outfits, we critiqued our favorite bands and movies on a critical, intellectual level, we even debated the right way to eat an ice cream cone. We talked about serious stuff, too. I told him all about my life (barring the paranormal stuff) - the earliest move I could remember and how it felt when I realized that my family was different for moving so often, how I felt about all my siblings and what their personalities were like, my regrets over not keeping in touch with some of the friends I moved away from, but how my philosophies about constantly moving saved me so much pain. He told me about how he only lived in one other city his whole life, and how it crushed him when he had to move when he was twelve. His parents had divorced at that time, and he chose to live with his father. His father had remarried when Dane was a sophomore to a woman much, much younger than Dane's biological mother. It was really weird for him at first, but she grew on him. She was currently 5 months pregnant and Dane was looking forward to having a

younger sibling. The whole school viewed us as a couple and I was teased about it occasionally, but it was always friendly, and I ended up forging new friendships with some of the people Dane knew.

I almost never wore my necklace any more. I trained myself to know when I could feel myself losing control of my emotions so that I could either retrieve it or find a moment to dance, but I was dancing on almost a daily basis, so I felt fairly secure in leaving it home most days. I felt like I was living a new, fresh, vibrant life, even though my routines didn't actually change on a day to day basis.

Not everything was rainbows and sunshine, though.

Dad just got worse. Soon he was losing weight and his skin was getting paler, and it was difficult to tell if it was that which made the skin around his eyes and mouth seem darker, or if it was because they were, in fact, getting darker. We eventually got a couple of letters from mom, containing vague statements about her work and how she was doing and they never gave a definite return date. Terra and Alvin were excited to receive the letters, but I suspected that it was a situation like you see on crime shows, where the kidnappers allow the victim to make a phone call so their family knows that the victim is still alive. I felt like a coward – I didn't want to ask Dad about what was going on and how I could help, and I was still afraid to ask for help from the other few supernaturals I knew. It took all the courage I had due to my paranoia about being attacked, but at one point I did sneak out to the graveyard to ask a couple of ghosts if they had seen Jack or if their network knew if something had happened to my mother, but they answered negative on both counts. I felt stupid for bothering them and didn't return.

I had pretty much given up on Jack, too. I resigned myself to the fact that he was a supernatural being, and that as such he probably had to leave at a moment's notice to help someone somewhere else. After all, my parents had to constantly move us because of their connection to the world of magic.

As much as I tried to tell myself that, though, there was the fact that Mina taunted me on a regular basis. She never spoke, never even laughed, she just made sure to catch my gaze and give me a smug smirk or walk super close to my desk and leave that awful, sticky-sweet smell hovering near me. It just didn't add up – she knew that Jack and I had become close, so it had to be the reason she was tormenting me. I knew she liked chaos and that there was the possibility that she was just tormenting me for her own sick amusement, but I had a hard time seeing her going to all this trouble if she knew that Jack had stopped caring and left for some greater reason.

...

I'm a liar, by the way. I hadn't given up on Jack. I tried to keep it locked up in an origami box I had up on my wall, but the fact was that I missed him more than I had missed anyone else in my whole life. There was a dull, aching pain in my heart every time I thought of him. Dane was the perfect boy friend, but I couldn't ever consider him my best friend. Not when I couldn't talk to him about why dancing was so important to me, or how worried I was about where Mom was and how my dad was slowly growing corrupt.



I thought about telling Dane everything paranormal that had been going on in my life. It would have been crazy for me to not consider it at one point, seeing as how I wanted to be the perfect girlfriend, but something strange happened the day I had resolved to make my confession. I had it all planned out – it would be after a Thursday practice, when I could spend

all the time I wanted to dance and outlet any excess emotion that would prevent me from telling him in a rational way. I dove deep into myself that day, and found myself dancing some fiery duet with the version of me dressed in the flame dress.

Don't tell him, she said.

Why not? I asked.

You can't trust him.

We've been dating for a full month now. If he wasn't trustworthy, don't you think that would have shown in his personality?

Has he really never said anything that struck you as odd?

No! Never!

Then why are you talking to me?

I... just wanted some guidance. So that I would know what to say so that he doesn't freak out.

Well, you came to the right person. And I'm telling you not to even so much as hint at this part of your life.

Who are you? Are you even actually a part of me?

She said nothing; just winked at me and then danced off into the black. When I snapped out of this trance I considered being defiant and telling Dane anyway, but I had this terrible sinking feeling about it and had to admit to myself that there was probably good reason the inner me in the fiery dress gave me such stern caution.

I had deep feelings for Dane, but as I finished my dance I found myself craving more free time. My days had evolved into: go to school, go to dance practice, stay a few extra minutes to dance for myself, then either spend the afternoon with Nobuko or, more often, Dane, oftentimes eating dinner with one of them. While I appreciated my dad's efforts to maintain the tradition of family dinner, he was making dinner later and later, and since eating with my family was more often than not a sordid affair any more, I had no desire to be home. I'd come home in the late evening, do my homework, and go to bed. I wasn't reading or watching movies any more, and I realized that I missed it.

So that afternoon after I almost made my confession to Dane I told him that I was feeling rather tired and needed a quiet afternoon to myself. He seemed a little disappointed, but told me that he didn't mind, since had probably been neglecting some of his hobbies lately as well, and that he'd drop me off wherever I wanted to go. I had him take me home, but as soon as he was out of sight I asked dad if I could borrow one of the family's cars and drive to the city library.

The library wasn't very large, but it was quiet and had lots of nooks and crannies where I could take a big stack of books and just sit for a while.

I hadn't read any fiction in a long time, and had no desire to. Teen novels about fitting in at High School seemed shallow, while science fiction and fantasy novels started turning into horror stories for me as I wondered if each of these authors wrote from experience or if they truly made up something unique. Instead I wanted to know more about wardcarvers. I had tried looking it up on the internet, of course, but the search engine insisted I look for a person named "Ward Carver" instead.

The library almost didn't have anything about wardcarvers at all. I looked through mythology books from many different cultures, some filled with fairy tales, some with historical backgrounds to each culture, and some with both. The word 'wardcarver' was never mentioned, but I finally found a nearly accurate description in, of all places, a book about the history of witchcraft. Most of the book was garbage, talking about how certain gemstones brought a



certain aura to you if you wore it in a necklace made in a lilac field at dawn or other vain rituals like that, but there was a small chapter about charms.

Charms were made by tying knots and beads together in different patterns. Depending on the type of knot or how many beads there were, the charm would be stronger or have different functions. Those with the “gift” could forgo tying the knots and beads in patterns altogether and could carve the shape of the charm into metal or wood instead. The chapter then went on describing the different charms that the reader could make on their own, though cautioned against trying to draw any charms on their own unless they knew they had the “gift”. The book also made a very big deal about how this was different than witch crafting symbols, which were carved onto candles and bark and burned during rituals, though carving witch crafting symbols also required a certain talent. From there it went on to a very big chapter of different rituals often performed, and didn’t really talk much again about symbols.

I looked out the window and saw that twilight was beginning to fall. I decided I needed to get home before it was dark for too long, especially since I was by myself. The route home took me by the school, which wouldn’t have been very remarkable, except that there was a fire running through the middle of the parking lot.

When I say “running,” I don’t mean that there was a line of fire that was following some preset path. There was a large cat-looking monster that was *on fire* and running through the parking lot.

I pulled the car over and got out to see what was going on. I panicked and started running towards the creature, hoping that it wouldn’t hurt anyone or raise suspicion. Before I got too close to it, though, it suddenly stopped and fell back, as though it had hit an invisible wall or had reached the end of a leash. I stopped and watched as it continued to run in several directions, hitting this barrier after a certain distance. I glanced around, wondering if there was anyone close by that was somehow associated with this creature.

It caught notice of me and started running in my direction. I took a few steps back, but it soon hit that invisible wall again a safe distance from me. It prowled back and forth just right behind this area, watching me carefully.

I started walking toward it cautiously. It bristled and hissed at me, and as I got closer I noticed that it was only cat-like from a distance. It was on fire, but underneath the flames I could see a body that was made of clay. It was scaly, like a lizard’s skin. It also had two tails instead of one, and its ears were way too long and lay horizontally on its head instead of vertically. It hissed at me again when I got within a few feet of it, and its tongue was snake-like. It was like nothing I’d ever even imagined before.

I took another step towards it, and suddenly it calmed down. It sat on its haunches and looked at me curiously.

“What are you?” I whispered.

“I serve.” It replied.

I let out a little shriek and jumped back. “You talk!” I stammered.

“Can I serve you?” It asked and tilted its head to the side. Its voice was high-pitched and cracked, as though it was new to talking.

I stepped towards it again cautiously. “What do you mean, serve me?”

“I was summoned. Did you summon me? I like you. You look warm.”

“No, I didn’t summon you... what are you, exactly?”

“I am... I am... I do not know what I am!” it howled, causing the flames on its back to flare up. When it wailed it was a very loud, high-pitched shrieking noise. I looked around, hoping no

one could hear. There were a couple houses across the street, and I prayed to whoever would listen that they couldn't hear or that they weren't watching.

"Shh, shh," I tried to calm the beast down. "It's okay. I can help you figure this out." It stopped wailing. "Okay. Good. Where did you come from?"

"I was home... it was nice... and then I was pulled out of home and into a lump of earth, and trapped here. Why can't I leave? Did you bring me here?"

"No, no. That wasn't me. Where is your home?"

It lay down on the ground and rested its chin on its paws. "I don't remember. What is my name? Master, do I have a name? Why can't I remember?!" It started wailing again.

"No no no no no! Shh!" I tried to calm it down. It continued wailing anyway, and kept glancing to the houses across the street. Was that a curtain I saw move? Oh, I hoped not.

Suddenly the creature stopped wailing and twitched its ears. "Something is coming! Something bad no good no bad! No, don't make me leave! Don't kill me!"

I tried to calm the creature down again, but it wasn't paying attention to me anymore. It seemed to be talking to something or someone else, and got up and started pacing again. It kept ranting like this, and I considered just leaving, but by now I was sure that someone had seen me.

Sure enough, a few seconds later I could see a cop car with its lights going coming down the street. The creature stopped and gave one final, painful howl before it suddenly extinguished. I approached it curiously and studied it as much as I could before the cops walked up to me and asked, "What's going on here?"

"Officers, there was a fire here and I was trying to put it out, but..."

"You were trying to put it out? We got several calls saying that you were burning a live cat here." I glanced over at the houses, and I could see several people standing at their open front door or looking out the front window out of curiosity. I wondered how many of them had been the ones to put a call in.

"What? A live cat? No! I mean, look, it's just a pile of clay. I saw it rolling across the parking lot and tried to put it out."

"Everyone that called said they saw you fanning and blowing on the flames."

"No! It looked really small and I thought I could blow it out, but it just didn't work at first. It's out now, though!"

"Do you have a cell phone?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you call the fire department?"

Oh. Crap. The officer was pulling out his handcuffs even then. "Listen, it's a really, really bad misunderstanding. I know it sounds crazy, but--"

The officer had already taken my hands and cuffed them together, though. "I appreciate you not resisting, but there was still a fire on school grounds that, so far, you're the only one connected to. You can call a parent once we reach the station and you can explain it then."

I rode in the back of the car, miserable. What on earth had just happened? I knew what I saw, but there was no way I could describe it to the police officers and still sound like a sane person. Once we got to the station I had to sit in an office for an officer to question me while we were waiting for my dad. I stuck to my original story as best I could, but it really wasn't convincing anyone. First of all, it's really hard to set clay on fire, and secondly, no one believed me that it really was a small enough fire that I was trying to put out by blowing on it, especially since it was large enough that people across the street could see it. I was an average student with no higher academic pursuits whose mother had suddenly left, which meant that they had no

reason not so suspect me for arson. It wasn't uncommon for acts of vandalism in cases like this, they explained to me, but normally it's limited to graffiti. Arson is a much more serious charge since it could lead to serious property damage and people getting hurt.

They also tried to get me to tell them what the awful shrieking sound came from, since even the dispatcher could hear it on the other end of the line when she received the calls from the neighborhood. I told them that I had no idea what the sound was coming from, which was technically true; I had no idea what that creature was that I had talked to.

This continued on for a good twenty minutes, until my dad was allowed to come in and get me. He was furious when he was let in to the office.

"How *dare* you arrest a minor for something like this! And how *dare* you prevent me from seeing her! I was waiting for *ten minutes* before the woman at the front said she'd let me in! What kind of a place are you running here?"

"Sir, I would appreciate it if you could--"

"No, no, don't you *dare* try to calm me down. You arrested my daughter because she happened to be around a fire in an *empty parking lot*?"

"We have eyewitnesses that say--"

"Did they actually see her start the fire? Yeah, that's what I thought. Unless you can prove that she started it, we're leaving. I can *guarantee* that this only happened because this is a small town and you think you have nothing better to do. I can guarantee that nothing like this would happen if we were in Denver. You drop any charges you have even *thought* about bringing against her, or I will sue."

The officer narrowed his eyes and glared at dad with his jaw set for almost a full minute. "You make sure your daughter stays in line. She will not get off so easily if this happens again," he finally said, and called another officer in to escort us out of the building.

We got in the car and sat in silence for several minutes. I could feel my dad seething in rage.

"Dad? I--"

"I can't believe you would go starting fires like that. Your mother and I very explicitly told you that starting fires like that would be a slippery slope. You betrayed our trust and advice and went ahead and acted on your own stupid impulses!" He was shouting at me.

I huddled against the door, scared of him. There was something about the way that he was angry that was more than just being upset at his kid for doing something stupid. It was almost hateful, and it frightened me.

"It was a creature. I don't know what it was, but it was a creature that talked to me, and--"

"No. I'm not going to accept any excuse for this! You need to take responsibility for what you've done. I'm willing to save you from the police, but that is only because I will not compromise the safety of this family!" He started the car angrily and peeled out of the parking lot.

I silently shook the whole way home, trying my hardest not to cry. I don't know what hurt more – that he didn't listen to me, his shouting, or that he didn't trust me enough to hear my side of the story. I tried to tell myself that he wasn't himself lately, but that was no comfort. Even with whatever was going on, he shouldn't have yelled at me.

As we pulled in to the house he said, "You're grounded until after winter break. I will be dropping you off at school and picking you up afterwards. No friends, no phone, no going out on your own."

"But--"

“No. No excuses. For the next four weeks you need to show me you can be a responsible person. If you’re good and you can keep control of yourself, then you can be on your own. Sometimes.”

I bit my tongue, not wanting to provoke him further. I went straight up to my room without another word to him and went straight to bed in the clothes I was in, not caring about eating dinner or how early it still was.



I got up earlier than usual the next morning, thanks to my early bed time. I used it as an opportunity to take a bath and gently scrub my face to try to get rid of the puffiness from having cried myself to sleep. I quickly made my own breakfast after that and went straight to my room to read until my Dad knocked on my door and told me it was time for him to take me to school. I refused to talk to him the whole way there, even after we pulled up to the front of the school and he tried to talk to me.

“Listen, I’m not really that angry. I’m just worried that, now that you’re aware of what you’re capable of, you’re going to start trying dangerous things. I want to make sure you’re keeping yourself in check.”

I got out of the car and slammed it behind me in response. We had managed to arrive right as the first bell rang, so I didn’t even have a chance to find Dane or Nobuko before class started. Seeing Dani in my first period class and the fact that she was still mad at me just made me more upset, and by the time I got to second period I was so angry that I was willing to deck the next person to even look at me funny. I even growled at Nobuko when she tapped me on the shoulder as she got into class, which I immediately felt bad for when I saw the look of fear on her face.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that to you. Sorry,” I apologized.

She nodded slowly, accepting my apology. “Are you okay?”

“No. My dad grounded me for something that wasn’t my fault. I’m not going to be able to do anything for the next few weeks. I’m pretty pissed about it.”

“What happened?”

I lowered my voice so no one else could hear. “Some people thought they saw me set a fire in the school parking lot last night. I was trying to put it out, but, you know, who’s going to believe a teenager?”

Nobuko gave me a pitying look. “I’m so sorry. Oh, no! Kenna, does that mean you won’t be able to dance after school?”

The thought hadn’t occurred to me, and I became worried. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll find out Monday. I hope not. He can’t reasonably cut me off from everything.”

She nodded, and the bell to begin class rang, leaving our conversation there.

Dad was at the curb to pick me up, and the ride home was much the same as it was to school. He even tried to rationalize his actions to me again, but I was determined that until he either apologized or asked for my side of the story he was not going to get a single word out of me.

The weekend was boring, as expected. Dane tried to come by and see me, even though I had seen him at school and tried to explain the situation to him. Unfortunately my dad got to the door before I could and they had a very heated exchange, which I heard from at the top of the stairs. Dane tried to convince dad to at least let him hang out at the house so dad could even supervise what I was doing, but dad stood firm about the absoluteness of my punishment.

Monday rolled around and Dad managed to drop me off at school again just late enough that I only barely made it to class on time. The anger I had with him was building up and I resolved to go to dance practice, regardless of whether it was banned as part of my grounding or not.

As it turns out, it was. Five minutes in to practice and he had managed to find his way to the studio.

“Kenna, I need you to come with me,” he said as calmly as possible, though I could tell he was just barely reining in his anger. I followed him to just outside the studio and stopped.

“You aren’t grounding me from this, too, are you?” I snapped. It was the first thing I had said to him in days.

“I thought I made myself clear. You are to be either at school or at home.”

“But I am at school! This is a school activity!”

“Well, I’m forbidding you to be here. This isn’t an academic pursuit, and therefore off limits as part of your punishment.”

“I got all my projects done this weekend! I only have about a half hour worth of homework and then I’ll have *nothing* to do for the rest of the afternoon!”

“You’re not supposed to have fun during a punishment. I need you to grab your stuff and come with me. *Don’t argue with me on this.*”

I stared at him as defiantly as I could, but he stood firm. Flushed with anger, I went into the studio, grabbed my gym bag and threw my coat on. A couple of members stopped practicing and even followed me out to see what was going on. I tried to ignore them and hoped they would just go back to practice. Thankfully no one actually left the gym, but the damage had been done. I officially had the rudest, most embarrassing dad, and since this was high school, that’s how everyone would think he always was.

Dane ran to catch up with us as we got to the parking lot. “Mr. Reyvens! Wait!”

Dad didn’t stop, ignoring him.

“Mr. Reyvens! Can I please talk to you?” Dad continued to ignore him and unlocked the car. “I’m sorry for coming to your house on Saturday and arguing with you!” Dad paused, this finally catching his attention. “I was completely out of line, and you deserve more respect.”

Dad nodded, satisfied with this. “Thank you for apologizing. But you still can’t see Makenna until her grounding is over.”

“I understand that, but that’s not what I was going to ask. Sir, please, Makenna has some extremely important pieces in our winter show. We need her during practice. Can you please let her stay? Please. I’m begging you.”

Dad shook his head and said, “Sorry, but this is absolute. I’m making no exceptions. You will just have to make adjustments to your show.”

“Will you consider it anyway? You can even come and watch, just to see that we are working hard and not just hanging out and goofing off.” Dane was starting to shiver, as there was snow on the ground and he hadn’t put a coat on before coming out, but he still stood firm.

Dad gave a noncommittal grunt and got in the car. I glanced at Dane before getting at the car and mouthed *I’m so sorry* to him. He nodded and mouthed something else back to me. I’m no lip reader, but I could have sworn that it was *I love you*.

I was thrilled at this for all of thirty seconds, when dad peeled out of the parking lot recklessly. I grasped onto whatever I could and wanted to shout at him about driving on icy roads, but held my tongue when I realized it would only make things worse.

About halfway home I decided to speak up, initiating a conversation for the first time since the incident on Thursday night. “You know, dancing it what helps me maintain balance. It’s my outlet. I thought that was a good thing.”

“Well, obviously it didn’t work as well as you thought, did it? You still tried to set your school on fire.”

I breathed deeply to try and keep calm. “It really wasn’t my fault. Can you let me explain?”

Dad said nothing. If he wasn't going to keep me from talking, I was going to do my best to reason with him, whether he'd pay attention or not.

“I was driving home and there was a creature running through the parking lot. I stopped to see what it was. It looked like some sort of reptile cat, but it was made of clay and it was on fire. It could talk, but it seemed really confused and started wailing when I asked it questions. That’s what caused people to call the cops, and I guess that me trying to calm it down looked like I was making the fire worse. When the cops showed up, all the flames extinguished and it just became a lump of clay.” I looked at him anxiously, hoping that he would believe me.

He didn’t say anything until we pulled into the garage. As he put the car in park he announced, “I’ve never even heard of any creature resembling that description. The closest I can think of is a fire golem, though the fire is usually on the inside of the body and I’ve never known one to be confused or wail. I will look into it. You’re still grounded until I can figure it out.”

My mouth dropped open in disbelief. “But...” I started, then cut myself short. This was a step in the right direction, and I wasn’t going to mess it up. We got out of the car without another word.

I was frustrated with my dad, upset that he was acting this way without mom around. I had an idea, and when I got up to my room I got out some paper so I could write to Ammon. He was usually in some exotic part of the world, taking pictures for a variety of travel magazines, but I found I could send a letter to the one that contracted him the most often and for the most part they’d get it to him just fine. I was comfortable with writing him things that I wouldn’t normally tell any other of my family members, because for some reason I felt that my secrets were safe when they were on the other side of the planet.

*Ammon –*

*I loved your last postcard. I never imagined Thailand to be such a pretty place, but you’ve managed to make it look like a paradise. I can’t wait to see what place you glam up next. Great job on the Alaska piece, by the way. The magazine finally printed it and it looks great!*

*Sorry it’s been so long since I’ve written. Things have been pretty crazy since we first moved to Steven’s Ridge.*

*I’ve been working hard at dancing. I never imagined that I’d like dancing more than gymnastics, but there’s something so freeing about letting myself go in the music. Ha ha. I sound like such a romantic, but it’s hard to put it any other way. The club has a show tomorrow and I get my own solo. I’m excited, but really nervous. Oh, and I have a boyfriend, too! His name is Dane and we’ve been going out for a while, now. He’s really great – a complete gentleman.*

*There have been some rough spots, though. Mom went away to Germany without saying goodbye, and we’ve only gotten a couple of letters from her since she left a couple months ago. It’s been really rough on dad – without mom he’s been throwing himself into his work, and it’s been making him sick and really angry all the time.*

*Anyway, sorry to end on a downer note like that, but if I don’t keep it at that I’m going to end up writing a novel, and I know it’s difficult for heavy letters to reach you.*

*I hope things have been going well for you. Hope to hear from you soon,  
Kenna*

I looked at my letter. It wasn't nearly as long as I would have liked it to be, but I needed to test the waters, first. If Ammon knew about my parents' wardcarving, and if he knew about us kids being named for the elements and all of us needing an outlet, all I needed was a quick note worded in a way to let him know that I knew, too. If he understood what I was trying to say, maybe he'd have some advice on how to deal with dad. If he didn't know, then he would just see it as an oddly short letter from me and throw it away once he was done reading it. I went downstairs again to find an envelope and stamp, and left the letter on the countertop so I could remember to mail it in the .

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER TWELVE

I resolved the next morning to be the perfect child. I could feel my temper building up, but if trying to rein it in was what was going to get me on my dad's good side again, that's what was going to happen. I got up early to get ready for the day before everyone else so I could make breakfast. I figured that if I could help out with all the morning routines, I could get dad to take me to school earlier than right before the bell rang, and I could actually see some people that I could only see before school began.

I finished cleaning the dishes, quickly put my coat on, and grabbed my jacket. There was still fifteen minutes before the bell was going to ring – even with the snow we'd still get to the school with more than enough time for me to chat with my friends.

Dad was sitting at the table, reading the newspaper. I stood in front of him for a minute, knowing that he was fully aware that I was there and ready to go. He ignored me, though, and kept reading.

I cleared my throat. "Um, dad? I'm ready to go."

"I can see. But we don't have to leave for another ten minutes"

"I know, but I was hoping that since I'm all ready to go, you could maybe take me a little early today."

"Why?"

And then I realized what he was doing. He wasn't going to take me to school early. He was going to be so strict about my punishment that he wasn't going to let me have any free time at all with my friends. I didn't respond to him, instead going to the living room to pretend to flip through a magazine. I was so furious I didn't even realize I had it upside down. Being grounded I could at least try to begin to understand, but this was just policing my life now.

I had to bite the inside of my cheek in the car the whole way to school to keep myself from starting an argument with him. Remember, I told myself, I need to be a perfect child. I fiddled with my necklace the whole way to school, wondering what my temper would be like if I wasn't wearing it. Over the last few days I was sure I was pushing the limits of what it could do.

As it turns out, it could only do so much for me. When I walked into first period I saw Dani sitting on the other side of the room, and just *looking* at her made me angry. What right did she have to be mad at me for being happy? She wasn't a very nice person anyway. I was better off for not being friends with her.

Not even Nobuko could help me out. I know she was just trying to be a good friend, but after the fifth time of asking me if I was okay I snapped at her. I'll admit, I said some things that I will not repeat to anyone, ever. She didn't bother trying to keep up with me when I stormed out of fourth period to go to lunch, and I tried to tell myself that I didn't really care.

When I got to the cafeteria I chose whatever table I wanted to sit at. Whoever wanted to try and sit at that table could go ahead and try.

When no one did I looked around and realized that it was the same table that I had sat down at on my first day here. The day that Jack had originally tried to confront me about who I was. Since it was winter no one wanted to eat outside, so by all reason someone should have tried to sit down at that table, but apparently it was still condemned. Well, that, or I really looked as angry as I felt.

Halfway through I caught a glimpse out of the corner of my eye of someone moving towards me. I looked towards them, but I knew who it was even before I got a look at their face – the smoky honey smell was particularly strong today, and made me sick to my stomach. Mina sat directly across from me, propped her chin on her hands, and grinned.

I glared at her. "I don't care anymore. Whatever you think you're trying to do, it's not going to work."

She stopped grinning, faked a melodramatic sigh, and reached inside her sleeve. She stood up, pulled out a handkerchief and daintily dropped it on the table. As it floated down it unfolded, leaving it open. The center was smeared with blood, and resting in it was a lock of hair - black, with a few grey and white strands.

All the rage that had been building up bubbled over. I stood up and roared incoherently, grabbing her hair and pulling down as hard as I could. She was expecting it, and was able to resist too hard of a blow to her head on the table. It didn't matter - it still was enough of a diversion for me to launch myself over the table and tackle her to the ground.

Obviously as we were in the middle of the lunch room and surrounded by people we could only cause so much damage to each other. She couldn't bare her fangs and, as much as it was pure blind rage I had powering my blows, I at least had enough sense to not try to incapacitate her. That doesn't mean we didn't cause a good deal of damage to each other, though. I don't know how long we fought, but some of the larger male teachers were finally able to break through the crowd of students that had gathered in a circle around the scene and broke us apart. Mina, of course, didn't resist being pulled away from me, but then again this was all just a game to her. It took two teachers to restrain me, and it wasn't until Mina was led out of the lunch room that I calmed down.

I was escorted by both teachers out of the lunch room and into the principal's office, which was on the second floor. I hadn't seen who had restrained me initially, and I was surprised to see that Mr. Anders was one of the teachers acting as my guard. He didn't meet my gaze as we walked, looking ahead the whole time instead. I didn't recognize the other teacher. They stayed on either side of me until I sat down in the waiting area outside of his office. I caught a glimpse of Mina, who was already talking to Principle Wright.

Fortunately for me, she couldn't show any physical damage - bruises and cuts require blood flow to be visible, so the worst I could do to her was break her nose and make it look crooked. That meant that even though I was going to get in serious trouble for fighting, my injuries would perhaps bring more sympathy than hers. I assessed the damage I took while I waited - my hands and arms were pretty sore, and I had a bloody knuckle on my right hand. I gingerly touched my face - my nose was definitely swollen and had blood slowly oozing out of it, my lip was cut, and



the area around my eye felt tender, too. Though I shouldn't have wanted it, a black eye would be great for my case. There was a huge rip in my shirt, and as I tried to line up the ragged edges of the tear I saw that she had actually taken a huge chunk out of it.

She was released from the principal's office a few minutes later, and gave me a smirk as she passed by. Principle Wright instructed the teacher I didn't recognize to now escort Mina to the library, where she was to stay until the final bell rang.

He invited me in to the office, and I sat across the desk from him. Mr. Anders followed in, but Principle Wright didn't say anything.

"Miss Reyvens. Would you like to tell me what happened?"

"Mina provoked me. I'll be honest with you; I struck first, but I only meant to give her hair a good yank and leave it at that. She hit back and from there I was just defending myself." That last part was a complete lie, of course, but I wanted to keep the trouble I was going to get in to a minimum.

"Well, I admire your honesty, but you still started a fight. I want you to know that we take fighting very seriously here at Alpine High. According to Mina, you were very aggressive and she was the one defending herself."

That bitch.

Mr. Anders cleared his throat. "If I may?" He asked Principle Wright.

"Do you have insight on this?" he asked.

Mr. Anders nodded. "I do. While I was trying to reach the girls, I saw some of the fight. While I didn't see the beginning of the fight, I did see the end, and Mina was extremely violent. As you can tell, Mina sustained very few injuries, while Makenna probably needs to go to the nurse's office as soon as she's done here. I think it's apparent who the aggressor is."

Principle Wright nodded thoughtfully. "Thank you. Even so, as the one to start the fight, you will have to undergo disciplinary action. I think two days of after school service should be sufficient. Come by here after school today and tomorrow. Kathleen can partner you up with one of the janitors. You can be their assistant for a few hours."

I allowed myself a little bit of relief. That was a lot less bad than I thought it would be.

"Of course, we'll also have to have a parent-teacher conference. Do you have a parent available to call right now?"

Never mind. That was enough to ruin my whole year. Dad was going to flip once he heard about this.

"Yes," I muttered quietly. "My dad's probably at home right now."

"Thank you. Now, go ahead and go to the nurse's office and get bandaged up." He stood up and opened the door for me. I exited, Mr. Anders following me closely.

Once we were back out in the hall Mr. Anders said, "I have plenty of first aid equipment in the classroom. We still have a few minutes before the bell to end lunch rings, I can bandage you up there."

"Umm... okay..." I followed him to his classroom and he had me sit down on a stool next to one of the raised tables. He reached underneath his desk and pulled out a fairly large, unmarked tin case.

"First of all, drink this," he said as he handed me a small glass bottle filled with a clear liquid. I unscrewed the cap and smelled it. It had an earthy smell to it, but no other smell to indicate what it was.

"Don't worry, it's just holy water. I just want to make sure that she didn't poison you in any way."

I stared at him, dumfounded. He turned his gaze away from the cleaning the cut on my hairline I had previously missed and said, "Is there something wrong?"

"You know that Mina's a vampire?"

"Well, yes. Remember, I'm a werewolf? I can smell her no matter where she is in the school. Awful smell, really. Like someone trying to cover up body odor with too much deodorant. Anyway. That's why I wanted to bring you here - I'm sure the school nurse doesn't have quite the same first aid kit I do."

I downed the contents of the vial. "Why don't you do anything about it?"

"About Mina? For the same reason that Jack or the other three or four people here - including you and me - who can do something about it don't. There are too many people here that can't know about us to risk doing something that would expose our world. Believe me, I've tried tracking her down on my own. She's impossible to find. This might sting a little..." He dabbed something on my forehead, but I didn't feel anything except the damp swab. When I didn't react he said, "Good. That one's just an ordinary cut. It's not long, but it's pretty deep, so I'm going to have to butterfly it shut. If you put antibacterial cream on it and leave it alone it shouldn't scar too much."

He dabbed some cream around my eye and handed me a mirror so I could clean up my own nose and lip. "There's more people here like us?" I asked.

He did the same thing with the damp swab that he had done with my forehead to check to make sure my lip just had a regular cut on it (it was clean), and started putting his mysterious first aid kit away. "Yes, and before you ask who they are, the answer is that I wouldn't tell you even if I knew. I realize it's probably difficult for you, not knowing anyone your age that's also involved in this world we live in, but even among other supernaturals we tend to be secretive. Like I said, I don't know who else, exactly, attends this school that could help. All I know is that every once in a while I can smell a spell being cast, so I assume we have a witch or warlock or two on campus."

"Spells have a smell?"

"To werewolves, they do. One of the more annoying things about being bitten is that everything has a smell. Spells smell like burnt rubber, so I probably wouldn't seek out the caster even if I cared."

The bell rang before I could ask any more questions, and since Chemistry was my fifth period class anyway, I wandered over to my normal seat. I could see students starting to walk through the hallway when I realized that my backpack was still in the cafeteria.

"Oh, no! Mr. Anders, I'll be right back!" I dashed out the door and down the hallway, nearly running into Jennie and Nate as I rounded the corner.

"Kenna! There you are! Boy, you're a wreck!" Jennie exclaimed, ever the sensitive one.

"Yeah. Hey, is that my stuff?" I asked, pointing at the bag and jacket she had in hand.

She nodded and handed it to me. "I saw you being escorted up to the principal's office. Is it true you attacked Mina?"

I motioned for them to follow me to class so we could talk there - I didn't need any more stares than I was already getting from those who overheard our conversation. We sat down in our usual spots and they attacked me with all sorts of questions. I dodged answering most of them, but for the first time ever they were more interested in me than in each other. Even during class they tried to whisper questions to me.

I tried to dart out of class as soon as the bell rang, but Mr. Anders caught me on the way out and told me to stay for a minute. He waited until the last student left and said, "Is everything

okay? I have noticed Jack's absence, and while normally I couldn't care less about him, you two seemed pretty close. As much as I hate to admit it, he's also done a lot to keep our little town safe. Do you have any idea what's been going on?"

I sighed despondently. "No, but I wish I did."

"And what about you? You've never struck me as the kind of person to get involved in fight. Are *you* okay?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Thanks, though."

The first student for his sixth period class came in, and I left.

Since Mina was apparently going to be detained in the library for the rest of the day I didn't need to worry about her showing up in History class. I allowed myself to mentally wander off for the lesson, thanking whatever higher power may be listening that I didn't get called on to answer any questions.

When the dismissal bell rang I trudged to the principal's office to talk to his secretary about the janitor detail I'd be doing. Unfortunately I opened the door right as my dad was exiting Principle Wright's office, shaking his hand. I froze like a deer in headlights. They seemed to be treating each other amicably, but that didn't mean that Dad wasn't going to blow up at me as soon as we were away from other people.

They saw me standing there and Principle Wright motioned me to come closer. "Makenna, thank you for coming! I think Kathleen has something set up for you. Mr. Reyvens, thank you for stopping by." My dad nodded politely at him.

"Kenna, I'm going to be by at six to pick you up tonight. Here, I can take your backpack for you. Work hard," my dad said to me on the way out.

Six o'clock? What was I going to be doing for the next three and a half hours?

I turned to Kathleen, Principle Wright's secretary, and she told me to go to the Janitor's shed next to the football field's concession stand and find a guy named Phil. I found my way easily enough, and found out I'd be on rock salt duty. I was to roll the rock salt dispenser on all the walkways on the premises that had iced over. Phil gave me a stale-smelling hat and mittens and showed me how to work the dispenser.

I had had no idea just how big the school premises were. There were all sorts of outdoor areas I never went to, like the fenced-off area where the art class did their spray painting projects, the sidewalk around the teacher parking area, and for whatever reason I also had to do around the bleachers at the football field, even though football season was already over and no one was doing outdoors PE.

It took the full three and a half hours for me to finish the areas I had been given charge over. Dad was right on time, parked at the curb in the parking lot. I got in the car without a word, deciding to let dad have the first word when he was ready.

Almost as soon as he buckled in he said, "I am very disappointed in you. *Extremely* disappointed. Within the space of a few days you've managed to set something on fire and get in a fight - both on school property. I don't know what to do other than extend your punishment."

"Are you willing to listen to my side of the story?"

"You have to be honest with me. I researched it all day and I haven't been able to any sort of description of the creature you *claimed* to have seen."

Ignoring the implication that I was a complete liar, I said, "You know that vampire I told you about that goes to my school? She's been trying to provoke me into... well, I don't know what, exactly, but today she led me to believe that Jack is hurt, that maybe she hurt him. I haven't been able to dance for a while to let out some of the anger I've been letting build up, so I

just kinda snapped." It wasn't a very subtle hint, but I hoped that I said it casually enough that he'd seriously consider letting me go to practice.

He didn't say or do anything for a few moments. Then, "Fine. I'll believe it, for now. You still shouldn't have gotten in a fight. I'm adding two more weeks onto your punishment." He didn't comment on the issue of whether or not I'd be able to go to dance practice. I was also a little resentful that he wasn't worried that I had gotten into a fist fight with a *vampire*.

Dad had finished making dinner by the time he left to pick me up, so food was ready to eat, if a little cold. Terra was notably absent, so dinner was eaten quickly and silently. I went straight to my room after I put my dishes in the dishwasher.

A few minutes before I decided to get ready for bed I got a knock on my door and heard Arvin say, "It's me."

"Come on in," I replied.

He came into my room and quietly shut the door behind himself. He leaned back against the door and said, "Is there something wrong with dad?"

I thought for a moment, unsure of how much Arvin could figure out based off of what I would have to tell him if I answered yes. I decided to keep it simple and said, "Yeah, I think so. Why?"

"He yelled at Terra today. I don't know what it was about, but she said she was going to her friends' apartment for the night. I think he would have grounded her if she wasn't a legal adult. And he grounded me today. He found out that I turned in a project late and almost failed it."

"What? You turned a project in late? I don't think you've ever done that before, have you?"

He shook his head. "No. I just had more important things to think about. I still passed, but I had to get him to sign a paper my teacher gave me saying that I understand that I need to turn in my assignments on time and that my grade will get docked down for being turned in late. He flipped out and now I'm stuck here for a week. I don't think I've ever been grounded before. I don't remember the last time you were, either."

"I was once a couple of years ago for breaking curfew. But I was really, really late and it was on a school night and I was only grounded for a weekend."

"What do you think is wrong with him? Does it have to do with mom being gone?"

"Yeah, I think he's pretty stressed, trying to do both what he and mom did before mom left."

"Is that all it is, though? Really? Because... well, never mind. So what did you do to get grounded?"

"The first or the second time?"

"You've been grounded twice?!"

"Yeah. Five and a half weeks, now. On Friday I was given four weeks because I tried to put a fire out in the school parking lot and the people in the neighborhood thought I was actually trying to start one. Today I got two more weeks and detention for getting in a fight at school."

"Wow. Did you win?"

I laughed a little at Arvin's interest in knowing the outcome. "No. In hindsight, I lost before I even threw a punch."

"What do you mean?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. Fighting is bad. That's all."

"Okay. Whatever. Do you think dad will get better any time soon?"

"I don't know. I wish I did."

Arvin shrugged. "Okay. Thanks. I was just wondering. G'night."

"Night." Arvin was a bright kid. I wondered if he had figured out more than he was letting on, analyzing our conversation for anything that I may have said to hint at anything bigger than what he should have known. He was a really clever kid; maybe he already knew about our parents and figured out that there was bad magic in the house.

As I drifted off to sleep a single thought went through my head over and over again - the image of Mina's bloody handkerchief drifting down to the tabletop, a lock of Jack's hair resting in the center.



The next day was extremely similar, with the exception of Mina failing to show up to school at all. My after school detention was another three hour long excursion, this time working on cleaning as much glass as I could inside the school. I got maybe halfway through before six o'clock hit, and I was ready to admit that the janitors got a lot less credit than they deserved. When dad picked me up that evening and started driving us home he seemed a lot less angry. By no means did he seem happy, but I was actually starting to get used to that.

Less angry was a good thing, though, because when he dropped me off at school the next morning he asked, "Does your dance club start right after school?"

"Yeah, why?" I responded, trying not to sound too hopeful.

"I will be sitting in on your practice today."

I couldn't help but grin. "Thank you, dad!" I exclaimed, and actually leaned over to give him a hug. "Oh! But I don't have my bag!"

"Where is it?"

"Next to my closet."

"I can bring it for you. I had a conversation with Calvin - he has an excellent understanding of the way teenagers think, especially kids in magic families - and he convinced me that if going to this dance practice is what's going to keep you out of fights, you should go. I'll allow it, but only if you can show me that it really does help. That means you don't just hang out with your friends, and that you have to show me that you can keep your temper in check. Understood?"

"Yes! Absolutely!"

It didn't matter that having that conversation with my dad made me late for my first class, I was walking on air that day. I had never before looked forward to dance practice with such anticipation. I apologized to Nobuko for snapping at her, and she readily accepted my apology. She asked if I was okay from the fight and even teased me a bit, making a comment about how often I got myself injured.

By sixth period I was practically giddy (especially since Mina didn't show up again), and when the final bell rang I ran down to the studio to try and meet Dane before my Dad got there. Dane walked in only about a minute after I did, and before he could say anything I threw my arms around him and kissed him.

We parted, our arms still around each other, and Dane said, "You're here! Are you allowed to be here?"

"Yeah! My dad's gonna come in any second to bring me my stuff, but I wanted to tell you that I'm gonna be able to practice!"

"What about the show?"

"I think so. He didn't say, but if I can come to practice, I don't see why not!"

Dane picked me up and spun me around. "That's great!"

He put me down and let go of me the second before the door opened. My dad stood there with my bag. He didn't say anything, but I could tell by the look on his face that he suspected that Dane and I were up to no good. Whatever, the important thing was that I could practice with the club now.

After I got dressed I joined in on the warm ups. No one said it too loud since my dad was in the corner, but almost everyone told me they were thrilled that I was back, even though I had only missed a couple of practices. It was already Thursday, and also the last normal practice I would have with my group for the winter show.

As I got ready to practice with the four girls in the group dance, I went over to my bag to take off my necklace. I heard my dad clear his throat in the corner. I looked up at him and he shook his head.

*I can't wear it,* I mouthed to him.

He shook his head again, and started to look angry.

"Fine, have it your way," I breathed quietly to myself as I slipped the necklace back on. I didn't get it - he was supposed to know that I wasn't going to be able to use dancing as my outlet if the necklace was on. He was getting more and more irrational every day.

Thankfully my own dance routine wasn't extremely set and the point of the practice was to help the other four girls practice their routine. I had a very basic idea of what I'd do, but every time I tried to dance the same routine twice it turned out mechanical. Dane finally told me not to worry about it, and that it would come together in time for the show, even if I had to make it up right before I got on stage.

Practice ended, and I walked up to my dad. "I need to stay a few extra minutes. Is that okay?"

"Why do you need to stay?"

I talked quietly, since there were still a few people doing some cool down stretches. "I need to be able to dance with my necklace off. It doesn't work otherwise."

Dad pondered this for a moment, then said, "Sorry, but I need you to keep that on. It's not just for balance, it's for your protection as well. Grab your stuff and let's go."

I didn't speak to him on the way home. From what I could figure, he could deal with my attitude if he wasn't going to let me fix it.



Monday rolled by pretty quickly, since there was no dance practice on Friday and I was still banned from doing anything during the weekend.

Dad sat in on practice again, which was now focused on coordinating our show in the auditorium, but we had to cut it short since we needed to go to the city to get our costumes for the dance. He almost wasn't going to let me go, but the whole club ended up contributing a few dozen excuses as to why I needed to perform and why it was important I choose my costume. He wasn't happy about it, but he finally relented. He made Dane promise that I be home by seven, and left.

After the club had chosen out the outfits for the main performances, I had to spend some extra time to pick out a dress for myself for my solo and also choose coordinating outfits with the other four girls in my second number for the finale. I had free reign over what I wanted to wear for my solo. I chose a strapless, nude-colored dress that had red ribbons woven into the bodice, but that dropped down unsecured over the skirt. The costume coordinator said that there was a

matching choker and slippers to go with the dress. I declined, telling her I was to dance barefoot, but that seemed to delight her only more and insisted that she come up with accessories for me to wear around my ankles any way.

For the finale, on the other hand, I had almost no say whatsoever. The four girls had a vision for what our outfits were to look like, apparently, because they had already chosen their dresses while I was picking out my solo outfit and were choosing my dress out by the time I had met up with them.

“You guys do know that you’re dancing in the same routine, right?” I said half-jokingly when I saw what they had chosen. Their outfits were a complete mess and in no way coordinated. Cassie had a bright red dress with tattered-looking sleeves and skirt, Leah had a strappy pale yellow dress with a long, flowing skirt, Lindsay had a plain, clean-cut spring green dress, and Katie had a blue dress with billowy sleeves. They were looking at plain white dresses for me.

Lindsay patted my head and cooed, “We’ve done loads of these shows. Trust us, these outfits are going to go great together.” Was she patronizing me? Worse, when I found a white dress that had a bunch of colored sequins sewn in a sweeping pattern onto it, Cassie snapped at me and told me I was getting it all wrong. They ended up choosing the most boring dress for me. It had a plain cut to it, with the skirt ending modestly at the knees, a round neckline and long, tight-fitting sleeves. There were no embellishments, no interesting hemlines. It looked like a nightgown for a five year old ballerina.

When I complained about this to Dane on the way home, all he did was give me a kiss on the cheek and say, “You’re cute. I’m sure you make it look great. A lot of what goes into consideration is how the hair and makeup will look with it, too. Don’t worry about it.”

I got angry at this and carried this anger with me all the way to bed that night. At about midnight I was still wide awake and starting to see red whenever I closed my eyes. I had to get up and do something, anything to take the edge off. Origami was out of the question since I had been doing so much over the last week and the thought of having to do more just made me angrier. Dancing was out of the question because I needed more room than I had to help soothe my mind. I decided to take the dumb romance novel I had bought with Nobuko all those months ago and reread that.

It ended up being a good thing I was angry that night. If I had fallen asleep I would have died.

[\*Back to top\*](#)

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I had only moments to react. As soon as I grabbed the book off my shelf, I felt a breeze come through my window, bringing in that horrid, honey and smoke smell that made my stomach lurch with panic and worry. I turned quickly, and as my curtains settled I saw Mina crouching on my window sill. She slowly grinned a mad, evil grin.

“Looks like I’m a little early,” she said. I realized I had never actually heard her speak before. Whenever she talked to Jack it was always too low for anyone but him to hear, and she never answered any questions in class, even when she was called on for the answers. Her voice was low and hoarse. I could imagine that if she were to talk quietly enough it could sound quite

alluring, but when she spoke aloud she sounded dry, hollow, and she couldn't properly form some of the sounds that needed to come from her throat.

She liked her lips. "That's okay, I can use a snack. I've been jealous of my little pet that drank from you – she said that your blood is spiked with something spicy. I've never had someone spicy before..."

She leapt through the air towards me. I dropped to the ground and smoothly rolled away and back on my feet. She was graceful and landed on my desk on both feet with almost no noise at all. My fight or flight instincts had kicked in, and I was still riding on the anger I had been nursing all night. Ten minutes of kickboxing a day was not a lot, but it was the best I had. When she jumped at me again, I punched at her a few times, the basic punching routine memorized into my muscles. Jab, cross punch, hook, uppercut. Switch sides. Jab, cross punch, hook, uppercut.

Though Mina was dead and couldn't build any muscle memory of her own, she had still existed in this state for quite some time and was able to prove to me why she had gone on this long. She deftly dodged each punch, then slashed at my face with her nails, which were long and filed into a point. I was able to lean away in time to avoid getting slashed, but mangling my face wasn't her goal – she caught my ankle with her foot and yanked my weight from under me. I fell on my back hard enough to knock some of the wind out of me. She kicked me in the diaphragm for good measure, then stood over me triumphantly. She bore her impossibly long fangs and started to crouch down over me.

She halted halfway down and hissed, turning to face my window. I took the moments distraction to kick my knee up into the side of her face, hoping I could dizzy her enough to at least scoot out of the way. My knee landed and I heard a horrible cracking noise. Mina made a noise between a scream and a growl and started looking between me and the window. I scooted back out of her grasp and turned my attention to my window, too.

Jack was jerkily making his way through my window, pushing the curtains aside. He silently rushed toward Mina, stake drawn. They slashed at each other, him with his stake and she with her nails. They fought quietly, the only sound being Jack's heavy breathing. I edged my way along the walls of my room to get to my desk. They were tearing up my room pretty badly, knocking down pictures, breaking glass, even completely smashing my night table to bits. I was nervous, not knowing how soon they would wake up my family, who would come to check on me for sure.

I reached my desk and located my lighter. Mina was old; if Jack was able to incapacitate her, the fire would quickly exterminate the vampire in my room. I clutched it tightly and waited for the right moment to strike. Jack must have noticed me holding the lighter at one point, because he was finally able to pin her down at stake's point and turn to me to say, "Quick, I doubt this bitch has enough heart left for my stake to work."

I flicked it on and approached her struggling figure. It was disgusting; she had lost skin where Jack had scraped her with the stake, but instead of blood and muscle there was only a black, flaky-looking substance. One of her eyelids was drooping over her eye on the side of the skull where I had kned her. She was wildly looking for a way out, and just as the flame was about to touch her hair, she gasped out, "Your mother!"

I paused. Jack harshly said, "Don't listen to a word she says. She's going to say anything she can in order to get away."

It was too late, though, and Mina knew it. She laughed and looked straight into my eyes. "I know where your mother is. In fact, I have a say as to whether she comes home in one piece or not. Those that are holding your mother captive know where I am, and if I don't contact them



soon, your mother will be the one to pay. Let me go and I'll make sure that she is released safe and sound."

"Kenna, I also know where your mother is. Please, she's very dangerous and it would be catastrophic to let her go." Jack was pleading with me. Mina was still struggling to get free from Jack's grasp, and it looked like he was only barely able to keep her down.

In response she said in a sing-songy voice, "I can already hear her screams from her fingers getting cut off. What will your poor father do when his wife is unable to draw up wards for him? He's already quite a ways gone, isn't he? He'll be forever lost without her guidance..."

I took my thumb off the lighter. Simultaneously, Jack cried out in despair and Mina barked a triumphant laugh.

"You will bring her back in one piece. You will bring her here, back home, and if she is missing a single *hair*, I will set you on fire the next time I see you." I whispered. She heard me and nodded.

"Deal. She'll be back in her loving family's arms by the end of the week. Now tell your boyfriend here to let me go."

"Jack. Get up."

He shook his head. "I can't do that. She needs to die, right here, right now."

I yelled at him this time, not caring if I woke my family up. "I'm not asking you. Let her go, *now*."

He looked at me with so much sadness and that I almost felt guilty for betraying him. Almost. I set my jaw and stared him down. Disgusted and enraged, he jabbed his elbow into her forearm, causing it to break. He got up, though, picked her up by the front of her shirt, and dragged her to the window. He neatly tossed her out and firmly shut the window, quickly locking it.

He leaned on the windowsill, head drooped while he was catching his breath. I waited patiently for him to turn to face me again before quickly stepping up to him and punching him right on the cheek. He stumbled back and held his face in shock.

"You DARE try to tell me what to do in my own house after disappearing for weeks? You have NO IDEA what I've been through!"

He sighed and nodded. "You're right. I don't know what you've been through. But if I can explain, I have much to tell you."

"Where's my mother?"

"In Germany."

"No, she's not. I know she's been kidnapped. You have no idea where she is, do you?"

"She truly is in Germany. Not by her own free will, but she is indeed there."

"Why haven't you rescued her yet, then?"

"I only escaped imprisonment myself about a few hours ago."

"What?! How long have you been imprisoned?!"

"I don't know. I have lost track of time. But I was captured about three or four days after the ghost party."

My feelings towards him should have softened, but when he told me this my temper only flared up more. "You were out and about for four whole days after the ghost party and you couldn't tell me where you were going? I know I'm just a weak ol' human being, but I could have at least found *someone* to help you! But since you just decided to drop off the face of the planet, I had nothing – NOTHING – to go on!"

"I'm sorry, I just didn't think that it was prudent to let you know—"

“You didn’t think it was *prudent* to let me know where you were going? You were my *best friend*. I *cared* about you. You’re the only person in the world I can talk to about anything, and – silly me – I had thought you felt the same. Well, I was wrong. Obviously. Go. Leave. I don’t want you here anymore.”

“Kenna, I just–”

“I don’t care.”

*I don’t care.* Those can be harsh words to someone you’re close to. You can use the reaction from someone you say those words to to judge how they feel about you. Apparently they hurt or angered Jack, because he straightened, clenched his fists, and left through my window without another word.

I shut and locked my window, and searched the house for a yardstick I could use to jam it shut. It was too long and I had to break it in half, but I didn’t care. I could buy a new one if it came down to it. Why did we need a yardstick anyway?

I got into bed and realized I was shaking all over. I looked around my room and assessed the damage. I was down one night table, two picture frames, the leg to my chair had broken completely off, and some of my origami pieces had been torn off their line. To my disappointment, the one I absolutely needed intact was torn in two. A half a box dangled pathetically on the line.

I crawled into bed and cried myself to sleep.



I ignored Jack the next day. When I had a chance to see him in the light, I saw just how awful he looked. He was so skinny and had cuts and bruises all over his face. He favored his right leg and his left wrist was wrapped up. I felt sorry for him and so badly wanted to spend as much time as I could with him and talk to him about everything, but every time I started to think of what I would say, I would just get angry at him for not considering me a close enough friend to tell me what he was going to be and for putting his selfish desire to kill Mina over my mothers' safety.

When he tried to seek me out at lunch, we quietly argued about letting Mina go. Well, it wasn't so much that we were arguing about it as it was that I was ranting and raving at him about how he apparently didn't value our friendship or my mothers' safety enough to make them a priority, but I was still angry at him and I felt better justifying it by saying that we were arguing with each other.

He continued to try to talk to me between the final bell and dance practice, but I ignored him and headed straight to the girls' locker room. After I changed into my dance practice clothes I took the long way to the auditorium in order to avoid him.

We were doing full rehearsals now, so practice took a little longer than usual. Dad was relaxing the rules a little bit and told me that until the dance show I could get a ride home from a friend, just as long as I got home before four thirty. I thought the extra time would be long enough that Jack would go away, but apparently he was going to be persistent and had camped right outside the auditorium. In the cold and snow. I should have been touched, but his persistence just annoyed me more.

As I walked out he caught my hand in his and said, "Kenna, can I at least give you a ride home? It'll take less than five minutes, I know, but I just want to talk."

I yanked my hand away from his and hissed, "No. I already have a ride home." At that moment Dane walked out of the auditorium doors. I made big, quick strides over to him, threw my arms around his neck, and gave him a kiss more passionate than I had ever been willing to give him before. We got a few whistles and whoops from the other dance members, which ended up encouraging Dane to kiss me back just as passionately. It was a shameless display, really, and incredibly childish, but it got the message across loud and clear - when Dane and I finally parted, Jack was nowhere in sight.

When Dane pulled up to my house, I invited him to walk me to the door. He declined, but put the car in park anyway.

"Kenna, what's going on between you and Jack?" He asked sullenly.

"Nothing. Why?"

"I'm not stupid. You only kissed me like that because it was in front of Jack, wasn't it? I know you two were close before he disappeared, so now that he's back I just want to be clear as to whether or not I'm just your rebound boyfriend."

I felt stupid and embarrassed at that. "It's not like that at all. I mean, I don't know how he feels about me, but I had thought that he was my best friend and he... did some things to show that having a friendship didn't mean much to him. He's been bothering me all day and I wanted him to just leave me alone."

"So you were using me to get back at him."

"No! Well, I mean, I worded that poorly, but... well, all I really needed to do was kiss you on the cheek to get the message across. The rest was because I wanted to."

He leaned over and kissed me passionately. I enthusiastically kissed him back, running my fingers through his hair and pressing up close against him. It was cold outside but the air in the cab was getting very, very warm.

He pulled away and I involuntarily let out a little disappointed whine. He chuckled and said in a deep, husky voice, "No more. Not for now, anyway. There'll be a time and place for that." He put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me into an embrace. We sat like that for a few blissful minutes, then he broke the silence and asked, "Am I your friend?"

I sat back so I could look at his face to try and get some clarification to his question. "What do you mean? Of course you're my friend."

"Well, I know I'm your boyfriend, but if we weren't going out, would I be your friend? Would you tell me your feelings and secrets, or would I just be some guy you knew from dance club?" I could hear the words he was saying, but I felt like he was trying to ask me some other question.

I couldn't understand what that question was supposed to be, though, and answered, "Jeez, I don't know. I mean, I feel like I can tell you almost anything—"

"Only almost?"

"It's just an expression, Dane."

"Then what aren't you telling me?" He looked at me expectantly, and even had a touch of anger in his eyes.

I realized that he didn't trust me. I shouldn't have felt so hurt since I really didn't trust him with some of my deepest secrets, but the difference was that I could see it in his face - he knew I was keeping something from him, something that was the difference between being close friends and being two teenagers that were physically attracted to each other.

I sighed sadly. "I'm happier with you than I've ever been at any point in my life. I thought you knew that." I let myself out of the truck and walked up to the doorstep alone.

I was restless, though, knowing I had left Dane like that and texted him with Arvin's phone a couple hours later.

*I'm sorry. There's some things going on with my parents that are unresolved and I don't really want to talk about it with anyone right now.* It was part of the truth, anyway, and vague enough that maybe he'd interpret it as my parents splitting up. My mom had been gone long enough that it was plausible.

He texted back about a half hour later. *It's okay. I understand. I shouldn't have gotten so upset at you, either. If there's anything I can do for you, will you let me know?*

*I will. Thanks. See you at school tomorrow.*

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Wednesday. Two more practices before the recital, so we started doing dress rehearsals and marking where there'd be props on the stage. Being modern dance, there weren't a whole lot of props - mostly backdrops and the occasional foreground items. The only one that gave me real trouble was for the finale. There were five ping-pong balls that had been cut in half and laid down where there would be props for my final dance. When I asked what they were for, Dane told me that the pieces hadn't come in yet, but not to worry since they weren't too big. He also added that it would be good for the performance if I stayed within the circle that the props formed. It was a large circle, so it shouldn't have been a problem, but it still irritated me that my dance was becoming less and less my own.

Jack was not waiting outside the auditorium when practice was over. In fact, I had only seen him during history class. Mina wasn't there, so I wasn't sure why he didn't just take the time to recover from his injuries, but apparently coming to school was simply that important to him.

When Dane dropped me off at home after practice, I noticed a complete change in the atmosphere. Whereas for the last few weeks there had been nothing but tension in the air, now there was something less... angry. It felt melancholy, and cold.

"Dad?" I called out. I heard nothing at first, until I got closer to the door leading to the garage. I couldn't hear dad very clearly through the door at first, but it was definitely him.

Suddenly he was yelling. "I did what you asked! I made the damn candles, I dropped them off at the spot you told me to, now let her go! No, I will not wait until they've been used!"

I didn't wait to be there when dad was finished talking and he came out of the garage. I heard all I wanted to know; curiosity was not strong enough to keep me there. I quickly slipped upstairs and waited until I could hear the door to the garage open, then slam shut. He slammed it shut hard enough I could feel vibrations at my spot at the top of the stairs, and Arvin came out of his room, curious. I motioned for him to be quiet and wait with me for a few seconds. We walked down the stairs as nonchalantly as possible, and tried to step loudly so we could announce our presence.

Dad was at the kitchen table, hunched over with his face in his hands. Apparently he was so out of it that he hadn't heard us stomping down the stairs.

"Dad?" I asked quietly. "Are you okay?"

He looked up at me and Arvin. He appeared to be feeling worse than ever - he was almost completely white-skinned, and the darkness around his eyes almost made it look like he had been punched in both eyes.

“Kids! When did you get home?”

Arvin gave me a confused look. I knew for sure that he got home before I did, and I wasn't exactly sneaking in when I came home, either. “It's almost four thirty, dad. I've been home for a while and Kenna just walked in. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, everything's fine. Wow, four thirty already? I've got to get dinner started. You kids have homework to do, right? Go do it. I'll let you know when I have some food put together.”

I ended up pacing back and forth in my bedroom. I fiddled with my necklace, anxious about the fact that I still had to wear it. Practice was never short enough that I could dance on my own afterwards and make my curfew, and most of my time was spent being directed by Dane on how to dance better with my backup dancers, so I couldn't even get a good dance in then, either. Dane didn't care, really, he just made me promise to “properly” dance during the show.

All I could do was think about what I had heard on Dad's side of the conversation. I wish I hadn't heard what I did, because now I was just more worried about mom. I now knew that dad was being forced to make candles. I knew that finishing them was the condition he had to satisfy for getting mom back. I knew that he didn't have a face to face transaction with whomever he was providing them for, which meant that he probably hadn't seen my mother's captor at all. All this was interesting knowledge, but none of it solved my primary worry: when was mom coming back? Apparently Mina had lied to me about my mother, since obviously she was still in captivity. I was disgusted with myself – I should have burned her when she had the chance. Why should I trust a vampire? It seemed stupid in hindsight.



The next day at school went very similarly, though since it was our last practice before the show we did a costume rehearsal. It was a long show, so even with all the solos being cut out of practice - Brittany and Lindsay also had solos of their own - we still went past four thirty. When I got home I was nervous – it was almost five, and dad was sure to blow his top when I walked in the door. I was sure I was going to have at least another week added on to my punishment.

I opened the door quietly, hoping that I could sneak past my dad and that maybe he would be distracted like he was the day before. Instead I was greeted immediately by Arvin, who had been sitting anxiously in the living room.

He rushed up to me and said, “There's something wrong with Dad. He's been in his workshop all afternoon. Come here and look!”

I followed him to the garage and up the stairs to the studio apartment that my parents set up as their workshop and research room. Dad was hunched over the desk, rocking back and forth, frantically scribbling away. I watched for a minute as he filled a page with sketches, then immediately crumpled it up and tossed it to the side. I walked over to the pile of scrap paper and uncrumpled one of the sheets. I was sickened by what I saw – they were obviously wards, but nothing stood out as being good to me. There were fierce –looking animals, like lions and bears, poised to kill; tools like hammers and nails that looked a bit too spiky; a skull that was missing teeth. All around these pictures were variations on the letters used to give meaning to the wards. I knew nothing about the language, yet I could feel that these letters did not spell out good things.

I went to my father's side and gently put my hand on his shoulder. He didn't respond, so I leaned down and gently and quietly said, "Dad, what's going on? This isn't good. You know you can't use these."

Arvin, who was still next to the door, said, "He can't hear you. I even yelled at him once today and he didn't even flinch. All he cares about are those pictures. Do you know what they mean?"

"I have no idea," I honestly replied.

I tried talking to dad again, staying quiet enough that Arvin couldn't hear me. "Dad, I don't know what you're trying to make, but it's not good. You're getting very, very sick. Mom will be back soon. I promise you that. But please, don't try to do this on your own. You're spiraling out of control."

That seemed to get his attention. He didn't look at me, but he shook his head, over and over, and muttered almost too quietly for me to hear, "I've got to get Lucie back. Just this once I can break the rules. Then I'll get her back and I'll get better. That's what I need to do. Yeah, that's all. Then she'll be back and all will be well. All will be well. All will be well."

I could feel my heart breaking. The man that raised me, the one that had been so supporting and so loving, the one that taught me to have a sense of humor, was completely lost. I could see it in his face – he was too pale, his eyes were too dull. I allowed my chin to quiver and my eyes to water a bit, then resolved to be strong for my siblings. I stood up and went back to Arvin's side.

Quietly, so dad couldn't hear, I said, "We've got to get some of these tools out of the workshop. We need to hide them. Maybe leave them with the neighbors. We can't have them here, though. I don't want dad to hurt himself."

Arvin nodded and without further question he gathered up as many tools as he could carry. I grabbed what I could, too, making sure to keep an eye on dad. He didn't notice us taking his tools. He was completely oblivious to everything that was going on around him.

We put all the tools in a box, went across the street to the McGwyns and asked if there was a corner in their garage we could use, just for a little bit. We knew it was an odd request, we explained to them, but it was really important that they stay out of our house. They were free to say no, we added, but they were kind, if a little confused, and cleared a spot on a shelf for the box.

When we got back home we sat at the kitchen table and stared at the surface in silence for a few minutes.

"Should we call the hospital?" Arvin finally suggested.

I shook my head. "No, I have the feeling it would only make it worse."

"Do you think there's anyone that can help?"

"I don't know. Wait! There might be someone!" I realized that there was a person that could possibly help, someone that knew what dad was facing. (Not Jack. The thought crossed my mind, but I quickly squashed it. Besides, he was constantly getting new pay by the minute phones so he was hard to track, and I didn't have his newest phone number, so I wasn't sure how to reach him anyway.) "There's a man named Calvin Briggs that works with dad. I haven't seen him, but I know he's come by at least once to talk to dad in the last couple of weeks. Maybe he can help!"

"What makes you think he can?"

“I... well... I think that dad’s really frustrated with work right now. Maybe this guy can help.” It wasn’t a lie, but apparently the wards for truth on the table didn’t put up with half-truths, either, and it was obvious that Arvin didn’t believe me.

“I thought that dad was upset about mom being gone.” He said pointedly.

“Well, yes, I think that’s mostly why he’s upset, but I think that work is making it worse.” That was closer to the truth, and apparently passed well enough to get past the wards.

“Okay. Well, do you know how to reach him?”

“Umm... no. But that’s why we have phone books, right?” I got up off my chair and grabbed the phone book from off the top of the fridge. I flipped through the white, then the yellow pages. The name Calvin Briggs didn’t turn up anywhere. I told Arvin to use his computer to look up the name while I called the operator, hoping that she could find him. I had no luck, and while Arvin found plenty of Calvin Briggs on the internet, none were even close to where we lived. Odd, I thought, that a man that could find my parents halfway across the country couldn’t be found himself.

We gave up the search after calling all the operators within fifty miles of our house. It was getting late, and we were hungry. Apparently Dad wasn’t going to take breaks for eating, and when I found my phone and texted Terra, she told me that she was staying with a friend again. She had only spent one night here since she first left – apparently she was getting ready to be someone’s roommate.

I found dad’s wallet on his night stand, and used some of the cash he had to take Arvin and myself out for pizza. It was an indulgence, but good comfort food on a crappy day. On the way home I stopped by a smoothie place and ordered one of the super food drinks for dad – the kind with every imaginable vitamin and packed with protein. I didn’t see dad eating any time soon, but hopefully I could coax him to at least drink enough of the smoothie to keep him somewhat nourished.

When we got home we found him exactly where we left him. I put the smoothie and a stack of plain paper next to him, and said, “Please drink this, dad. I’m worried about you. And I hope that you can just get this out of your system, because I don’t know what else to do. I’ll be by to try to get you into bed later.”

He didn’t acknowledge me, but I thought I saw him quickly glance at the cup, so I was at least hopeful of that.

I went to my room and sat at my desk despondently. I was, for all intents and purposes, parentless. I could feel anxiety starting to fester in the back of my throat. Who could I possibly ask for help? I couldn’t think of anyone that wouldn’t just turn right around and let child services know that the one parent in the house was unfit for caring for children. I had started to think, once dad was starting to get super restrictive, that I could handle taking care of myself, but all of the sudden the realization of what that meant flooded my brain. How could I take care of the house payment? I had no idea how to access my parents’ bank account, and even if I did I had no idea how much they had saved up. And what about grocery shopping, and paying the bills?

It was getting late, and I wanted to start getting ready for bed, hoping that a good night’s rest would help me get everything sorted out in my head. I went back to the workshop to check on dad. His head was down on the desk, his pen still in hand. I panicked, hoping he wasn’t hurt. I put my hand on his back and could feel it slowly rise and fall. He was still breathing, thank goodness. I checked the smoothie cup and found the contents were over half gone. Well, that was good, anyway. I took the pen out of my dad’s hand and set it next to him, then ran down to

the living room to grab a throw pillow and blanket. I wasn't nearly strong enough to try and take dad down a flight of stairs, across the house, and up another flight of stairs to get him into bed, plus I didn't want to wake him up any way. I wrapped the blanket around him, then slowly and carefully lifted his head to slide the pillow beneath it. He didn't disturb at all, which did worry me. I would have to check on him in the morning to make sure he actually woke up.

When I got back in the house Arvin was in the kitchen, making some hot chocolate for himself.

"Dad's asleep," I said as I put the leftover smoothie cup in the fridge and grabbed a mug so I could make up a cup for myself. "He's really out of it. It didn't bother him at all when I moved his head to put a pillow under it."

"Do you think he's going to wake up at all?"

"Yeah, I think so. I'll make sure that he's up before I leave tomorrow."

"You're not going to stay home and make sure he's okay?"

"No. All I would do is just pace around the house and worry about him. I think he and mom would just want us to spend the day like we normally would. You should go to school, too. I know you're worried – I am, too – but I honestly can't think of anything we can do. Hopefully mom will be home soon and she can help him."

Arvin nodded sullenly. "I guess you're right. Good night, Kenna." He walked out the door, taking his mug with him up to his room.

I finished my hot chocolate in the kitchen, then turned off all the lights in the house and made sure every window and door was locked. As I got in to bed I realized how secure I had always felt with a parent in the house – now that dad was essentially gone, I was alone in the house with Arvin. It felt too big, and the shadows seemed too dark. I don't remember how long it took for me to fall asleep, or if I even fell completely asleep at all. It felt like I was tossing and turning all night, waking at the smallest sound.

"To whoever is listening, please help dad get better," I prayed. "And please bring mom home safely and soon."



I got up the next morning feeling like I had had a ton of bricks on top of me all night long. I skipped my shower, threw whatever I grabbed out of my closet first on, and pulled my hair up in a pony tail. I rushed down the stairs and over to the garage so I could check on dad.

He was already awake, the pillow on the ground and the blanket still around his shoulders. Unlike the day before, it looked like he was spending time on the drawing he was working on now. I cleared my throat to announce my presence, but he didn't seem to notice. I walked over to the desk to see what he was working on. It looked like he was starting in on the lion I had seen in his sketches, but this time more detailed and with smoother lines.

I leaned close and whispered in his ear, "That's not right. Try something different." This made him pause, lean back from the drawing, then nod.

"Of course. How could I not have seen it? This is wrong, all wrong." He crumpled up the paper and fresh sheet from the stack.

I went to the kitchen to grab the smoothie he had started in on the night before. It wasn't much, but I could get him another smoothie on the way home, or maybe even find something that he would eat. I set the cup next to him, looked at what he was drawing, then whispered in his ear again, "No, that's not right, either. Keep trying."



He paused, then did the same thing he had before. It was cruel of me, I knew, but I couldn't have him settling on a design. I just needed him to wander around until I could think of something to do to help him.

I took one of the cars to school so I could drive home quickly on my lunch break and check on dad again. I didn't allow Nobuko to come with me, even though she asked. I didn't want anyone to see my dad in the state he was in. He had finished the smoothie, so I went ahead and made a sandwich for him before I went back to school, but not before telling him that he was still getting his wards wrong.

I did see Jack during history, but I chose to ignore him. What would he have known, anyway? He said he only knew of one other couple that were wardcarvers, and it was so long ago he probably even barely remembered them. They probably didn't split up at all before dying. Of course, this was all conjecture, but it made me feel better about rationalizing about not talking to Jack about what was going on.

Since it was bad luck to do a practice on the day of a performance, I got to leave as soon as the bell rang. I stopped by the smoothie shop again on the way home and got the same kind of smoothie for my dad, plus a smoothie for myself. I was hungry, but I didn't want to weigh myself down before the performance.

Dad had only nibbled on the corner of the sandwich, which was disappointing. I had hoped that he would get something solid in him. I left the sandwich where it was, put the smoothie next to it, and crouched down beneath his eye level, hoping that he would maybe look at me.

"Daddy? Can you hear me? I'm going to have a show tonight. The one I've been practicing for? I know that you're not thrilled with it, since I'm supposed to be grounded, but I really hope you can come. It would mean a lot to me if you did."

He didn't respond at all. I stood up, disappointed, then looked at what he was drawing. "You still don't have it right," I said, then walked straight out the door. The last thing I heard from him was the crumpling of paper, then the slide of a fresh sheet coming off the pile and into place.

[\*Back to top\*](#)

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The performance started at six, but I needed to be there an hour early to help organize the costumes, the changing areas, and the makeup table, not to mention all the warm ups. Soon – almost too soon, really – the auditorium opened to the audience, and the seats started filling.

I only danced in one of the dances in the first part of the recital. It wasn't that I was cut out because I was bad, but Dane made a last-minute executive decision to only have me dance my two pieces and one dance besides that. The last dance was the one the audience was going to remember the best, he said, and I needed to be full of energy for it.

The first half was mainly for the routines for the ballet-style dancing. When I wasn't getting ready for the dance I was in, I watched the pieces from just barely offstage. Each dance had an idea or emotion behind it, and when they were all put together they told a story. Maybe the audience didn't see it, and really the club as a whole hadn't intended to piece a story together, but I was moved as I watched this fairy tale unfold.

A young, beautiful, but mysterious little girl wanders into a village. The village rejoices, because there is a monster in the woods that lured their own girls into the woods and ate them up,

so they no longer have young girls of their own. They watch over her night and day until she is eighteen years old. She announces that she is ready to make her own decisions, and that she wants to travel to the closest village so she can start to see the world. She wants to go by herself, but the villagers insist that she be escorted to ensure that she comes back. She travels to all the villages in the area, discovering new things and meeting new people every time. She is safe on each journey and returns home willingly every time, and there had been no attacks from the monster for years, so over time she has fewer and fewer escorts until soon she is traveling on her own.

On one trip she runs into a handsome young man in the woods. He woos her, and she falls instantly in love. It turns out he is the spirit of the forest, and he takes her to his magical kingdom, where he adorns her with jewelry and fine clothes that make her look like his princess. The creatures of the wood dance joyfully, praising their new leader. She enjoys herself, but tries to go back to her village because she cares about the people that raised her and doesn't want them to worry about her. The spirit of the forest forbids it, though, and she realizes that he is the monster that she had been warned about since she was little. The two dance a wild dance as she attempts to get away. Unbeknownst to them, the villagers are out looking for the girl since she did not return. They spot the two dancing from a distance, but because the girl and spirit are dressed in clothes to match the woods, the villagers mistake them for the monster and shoot their arrows. Each arrow hits its mark, but the spirit of the woods cannot die until the forest itself is destroyed. The young girl is still only human, though, and loses her life. The villagers realize what they've done and hold the grandest funeral they've ever put together, celebrating her life and the joy she brought to them. As for the spirit of the woods, he disappears, knowing that there will always be young, beautiful girls to woo for his amusement.

It's a tragic story, but the dance is based in ballet and I could think of few ballets that had happy endings. There were tears in my eyes by the time the curtain fell, but I quickly had to wipe them away so I could get ready for my solo, which was the first piece of the second half of the show.

The costume designer made good on her promise to provide accessories for the dress for me. She was extremely talented at her job - based off of the thirty seconds of dancing I had done for her, she was able to come up with a costume that matched my dance perfectly. The dress was almost exactly the same, but she had sewn red sequins onto the end of the ribbons. They were virtually unnoticeable until I started dancing and they trailed and flapped behind me on stage. When they caught the stage lights they shimmered and it looked like I was leaving fairy dust in my wake. She had sewn red sequins on red ribbon for me to tie around my ankles, upper arms, and neck, too. The ribbon around my ankles was tied snugly and had no loose ends (mostly so I wouldn't trip on them), and it looked like I was lighting up the floor wherever I stepped. The ribbons around my wrists and neck had long, loose ends, though, so they had a similar effect that my dress did. I adored it.

I took off my necklace and was almost giddy. I was finally able to dance – *really* dance – and while one song probably wasn't going to be enough, I was going to try to make the most of it.

The music started. I dove deep into myself. There was no preset routine; I just needed to do what I normally did when I needed an outlet.

The full realization that I had had my necklace on for over a couple of weeks hit me, and I found that there were so many emotions I had dulled and beat down because of it. I was angry at Jack. I was scared of Mina. I was worried about my mom. I felt truly sorrowful for the shape

my dad was in. I was unsure of how deep my feelings for Dane were. I still didn't know why the girl in the flame dress inside me didn't trust Dane.

It didn't take long for me to find the girl in the flame dress. Or for her to find me - I wasn't quite sure which one it was. We danced.

You look good, she said.

Thanks, I responded.

It's been a while.

I know. I'm sorry.

Don't apologize. It was necessary for you to protect yourself. You need to keep the necklace on for just a little while longer.

Why? Am I in danger? What's going to happen?

I don't know. Something's not right, though. I can see everything that's happened, and I know they fit together somehow, but the pieces aren't falling in to place the way they should be. I do think you are in danger, though. Please, wear your necklace.

How do you know this? Who are you?

Let's leave it at this for now: I trust you, and you can trust me more than anyone else.

The song ended and I had to snap myself out of the trance so I didn't interrupt the flow of the show. I took a graceful bow to the applause. Any other time I would have reveled in the praise of the audience, but all I could do was think about getting off the stage quickly and get back to my bag to grab my necklace.

Before I could reach my bag, though, Cassie ushered me over to the dressing and makeup area. "Get your dress on quickly! We've got to get your makeup done exactly perfect for the finale."

I tried to protest, but I was already caught up in the whirlwind of girls handing me my white dress behind the dressing screen, dragging me over to the makeup table, and starting in on styling my hair.

The makeup the other girls in the finale chose was unusual. They had a pot of black paint that they used to paint designs onto their arms and faces. My arms were covered by long white sleeves, but they still painted my face and hands to match theirs.

Before I knew it, I was lined up behind the very back curtain, in place to begin the finale. I tried to sneak away to go grab my necklace, but the other four girls grabbed my arms and kept me in place, insisting that the timing needed to be perfect.

The curtain went up. We stepped into position. We started dancing.

We performed exactly as practiced, though my dance was only just barely what it should have been. I kept falling in and out of my trance, unable to feel at ease. As I spun I noticed that the props that the ping pong balls represented were candles, and that one of them was lit. Had that candle been lit when we stepped on stage?

I tried to concentrate on the dance and perform well, but I fell back into reality when I noticed another candle was lit. Was this part of the effects? No one told me. I maneuvered my way closer to one of the candles, hoping to inconspicuously get a closer look at it. A jump and a spin, then lean back impossibly far.

Even looking at it upside down, I recognized the handiwork. There were symbols that looked like a strange hybrid of witching symbols and wards carved into the candles, and they were spiky and overly elaborate. The wards glowed on the candle I was looking at it, and the candle spontaneously burst into flame. I almost fell down in surprise.

I quickly tried to cover up my stumble, and closed my eyes to try and lose myself in the dance. I was confused and afraid, and tried to dance it out. It worked, but only just barely.

The dance ended, and the final candle lit. The audience stood and applauded and cheered, but to me their praise sounded far away. The wood under my feet felt warm, and it was getting hotter. Something was happening under where I was dancing, and I got a horrible sinking feeling it wasn't a good thing.

I ran off the stage, not even bothering with a curtsy or bow. A growing sense of dread formed in my gut as I reached my bag and looked through the pockets.

My necklace was gone.

Panicked, I looked around to see if anyone had it. No one was paying attention to me, instead lining up excitedly to take the final bow. I couldn't see any jewelry around anyone's necks, no fists clenched to hold a small item. I could feel my heart beating faster. I needed my necklace. If anything, I needed the wards for safety and luck.

Out of the corner of my eye I spotted a flash of pale yellow. The four other girls from the finale were forgoing the final bow and walked in a line to the prop room. They went in and closed the door behind them. I followed, wondering what was more important to them than wrapping up the performance.

As I approached the door, I could feel the heat I felt on the stage again. It was like a literal game of "hot/cold". I reached out for the door handle, but someone grabbed my wrist to stop me. I spun to face Dane.

"Kenna! You need to make your final bow! You're the star of the show!" He was smiling, but it didn't feel very friendly.

"It's not a big deal. I need to get in there—"

"I insist. There's a lot of people that are going to want to talk to you!" I struggled to get my wrist out of his grasp, but his grip only tightened.

"Dane, you're hurting me," I said.

Dane was no longer smiling. I could feel the heat coming from under the stage getting more intense. "I can't let you go in there. Come with me, Kenna, and forget about it."

Suddenly I realized that there was something really, really wrong going on, and Dane knew what it was. I wanted to believe that he was protecting me, I really did, but I needed to know what was going on, because I was positive at this point that it had something to do with my final dance.

I threw my arm around in an arc, twisting his arm in a way that forced him to let go of me. He growled in frustration and launched himself at me. I held my arms up to protect myself, but it wasn't necessary. Jack threw himself at Dane at the last moment, knocking Dane to the ground. Jack partly lifted Dane up by the front of his shirt, then head butted him. Dane went limp, unconscious.

Jack turned to me and gently held me by the shoulders. "Are you okay?" I nodded. "I don't want to upset you, but I've been keeping my eye on him during the show. I'm sorry if I betrayed any trust you may have had left for me, but I didn't think you'd believe me if I told you he intended harm to come upon you. My suspicions were confirmed when he was looking through your duffel bag, presumably for this. He appeared angry when he couldn't find it." He reached into his pocket, pulled out my necklace and handed it to me.

I stood there, silent. Here was someone that I'd hurt and ignored over the last week, convinced that he didn't care about me, and he still worried about how much I trusted him. I threw my arms around him in a hug and buried my face in his chest.

"Jack... you're such a creeper. Who stalks someone else's boyfriend? That's unhealthy. "

"It's just that I've been investigating his activities for a while and— "

"Jack. I'm kidding. Well, kind of. I'm a little confused as to what's going on right now, but I am willing to stop being mad at you for the rest of the night if you help me out. Something bad is going on and I think I caused it. There's something going on under the stage and I need to see what's happening." I let him go and slipped my necklace on.

"I think it would be best for you to stay here. I have an idea of what's happening and I believe it would be very, very dangerous for you."

I laughed. "Nice try. But I really do think I caused this and I need to be there to end it. Unless you want to head butt me, too, I'm coming with you." I pushed my way past him, opened the door to the props room and led the way in.

No one was in there. I couldn't understand it - I saw four girls go in, and there were no other exits out of the room. Jack seemed a little confused, too, but then started stomping around the room. Not just walking heavily, but an actual stomp on the floor as hard as he could with each step.

"What on earth are you doing?" I asked. Before he could answer, he stomped down on an area that reverberated at a lower register than the rest of the floor. He got on his knees and smoothed his hand over the floor, finding an invisible catch. He lifted up a square of the floor up to reveal a staircase. Ah. A trap door.

He started down the staircase, but stopped a few steps down. He turned to me and said, "I must tell you again, I don't want you to come down here. I don't want to see you get hurt."

"A trap door has been discovered. It begs to be explored. Not going down those stairs would be the biggest regret of my life." I was making jokes, but I could feel butterflies in my stomach. I had an awful feeling that whatever it was I had caused was not a force for good.

The stairs led to a dank, dark, curving hallway that sloped downward. There were sconces holding lit torches attached to the wall just frequently enough that it never became truly dark - but only just. I tried to orient myself, but the curve of the hallway was too gentle to say for sure what direction we were facing, and all I could really say for certain was that we were moving in a spiral under the auditorium in the school.

We walked on in silence for quite some time. By the time we reached a point in the hallway where we could see a light cast on the wall and hear voices echoing, I guessed that we were at least a couple levels underground. Jack held up a hand to motion me to stop, then held his finger to his mouth to tell me to keep quiet.

He stepped lightly, keeping himself flattened against the wall. I followed suit. We got close enough that we could hear the voices clearer, but I couldn't make out the words. They were chanting words I couldn't understand, and after each phrase was finished I could feel the heat flare up even hotter.

Jack leaned over to whisper to me, "They're summoning something. I should have realized that as soon as I saw the candles on the stage. Your dancing channeled the energy needed to summon whatever it was they are trying to bring into this world."

"Would you like to see your handiwork?" A voice said from behind us. We turned quickly to see Dane striding down the hallway. He was squinting due to his head obviously hurting, but he seemed fine otherwise. At least, the gigantic sword in his hand made him seem so. He pushed us out of the hallway into the room, keeping a tight grasp on my arm and the sword pointed at Jack.

What we saw was horrendous. Seven members of the dance club - including the four that danced with me in the finale - were kneeling in a circle around a pagan design etched into the floor, arms raised in some sort of perverted worship. A gigantic monster that was made completely out of fire was slowly emerging from a glowing portal that hovered above this design on the floor. Every time the dancers finished chanting a phrase they bowed down and touched their foreheads to the floor. I could feel a surge of heat and power and the fire creature worked its way a little further through the portal. From what I could tell they were about three quarters of the way through, leaving not much time to stop what was going on.

"Dane... what is this?" I asked, horrified.

"Kenna, I'd like to officially introduce you to the coven."

"Coven?" I was unfamiliar with the word.

Jack spoke up. "They're witches and warlocks. Horribly misguided ones, at that."

Dane jabbed his sword menacingly at Jack, keeping him where he was. "Enlightened, you mean. We've been practicing at magic for a while, but none of us have the ability to channel magic. Not naturally, at least. The most we've been able to do is create charms that half-work and occasionally write summoning symbols to commune with the dead."

"You couldn't just go to a cemetery?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Your naivety is charming. No, it takes quite the ritual to summon a ghost, and even more preparation and contributing voices to summon someone specific.

"But you... the first time I saw you dance unencumbered by your preconceptions of dance and your material belongings, I knew that you were special. I could tell that you were channeling some great power that I had never before encountered, and I saw great things for you and for me. For us, Kenna."

Well, that was just peachy. My boyfriend was a nut job. I glanced nervously at the demon emerging from the portal. It was getting really close to being fully emerged.

"You really shouldn't do this, all of you," Jack spoke up. "You have no idea the repercussions of summoning something not of this world!"

Dane roared and jabbed the sword's tip up into Jack's neck. He didn't kill Jack, but I saw a thick trickle of blood run down the sword. "One more word and all I have to do is flick my wrist for you to be *gone*."

"Then kill me." Jack challenged. Dane yelled wordlessly, pulled the sword away and slashed widely at Jack. Jack tried to jump back out of the way, but the sword's tip still tore a wide slash across his chest. He stumbled back into the wall and held his chest, gasping. I watched in horror as the wound quickly turned black. He slid down the wall and sat motionless.

"Jack!" I cried and tried to free myself from Dane's grasp, but he held fast.

"The sword is coated in a paralyzing venom, which should keep him quiet for a while. He won't die... at least not immediately. His blood should be satisfactory as tribute to our new leader."

The demon was only a couple chants away from fully emerging from the portal. Dane dropped the sword and grasped my other arm to turn me to face him. "This being can provide us with great power. All we have to do is bring him into the world and ask, and finally, *finally*, those of us that have been faithful to our craft can have the ability to work magic the way it's supposed to be worked."

"Who told you this? What could possibly make you think that summoning a demon would be a good idea?"

"Not a demon, a *god*. There's so much in this world that you don't know about - so much I didn't know about until this man approached me and started showing me the true nature of magic! I could be just like him, but I need to finish this!"

The final chant was done, and everything was quiet. The portal disappeared and the fire demon was standing in the middle of the circle of witches and warlocks, who were bowing down to him. The demon was tall - at least nine feet - but incredibly skinny. Its limbs were wavering, giving me the sense that it was only half-formed. Dane turned me around to face the scene straight on and he whispered in my ear, "You were amazing. From the first time I watched you dance I knew you could channel an element, but fire? I couldn't have asked for a more perfect girlfriend. Once I receive his power, I want you by my side for the rest of my life, to strengthen me further. I could become the most powerful man in the world, all thanks to you."

Before I could respond, Lindsay rose from her knees and held her arms up to the demon. "Oh great god of fire, grant me some of thy power, that I may strengthen my own powers and act according to thy will!"

The demon screeched and turned on Lindsay, raising its own arm in the air. It brought it down and engulfed her in white-hot fire. The flames consumed her so quickly that she didn't even have a chance to scream, and within seconds a grotesque, human-shaped statue of ash was left standing where she had once been.

The reaction from the rest of the coven was immediate. They got up off the floor and tried to run towards the entry to the hallway. I could feel the demon's madness, though, and it rampaged on to block off the exit and proceeded to set them all on fire, one by one.

Dane turned me back around to face him and shook me violently. "What happened? Did something happen during the dance? Did you stop partway through? Did you knock a candle down? TELL ME!"

"I don't know! It was just hard to concentrate after I saw the candles and the wards etched on them! I stumbled, but it wasn't noticeable!"

"NO!" He yelled, then shoved me to the ground. "It needed to be perfect! The demon is incomplete!" He ran over to the demon and knelt in front of it, holding his arms up and pleading with it. It was ignoring him, though, still working on the rest of the coven.

I got up and ran over to where Jack was. He was still breathing, and the gash on his chest was shallow enough to only just be oozing blood. He was paralyzed, though, and couldn't get up.

I tore off a part of my dress and pressed it against his wound. "I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do" I repeated over and over. His eyes looked wildly at me, then down to his jacket pocket, over and over, until I understood what he was trying to tell me. I reached into it and pulled out three familiar vials of clear liquid. I unstopped one, lifted the makeshift bandage up, and poured the contents of the vial on the wound. The gash hissed and sizzled. The sword Dane used was coated in vampire venom. Whether or not he realized that's what it was raised a whole new set of issues. I unstopped another vial immediately after, and forced it into his mouth so he could drink. Going for broke I pulled the stopper from the final vial and poured its contents onto his chest again.

He breathed deeply a few times and whispered, "Get out of here. I'll be fine, now, but you can't take on a demon by yourself."

"Can *you*?"

"I've... faced a few demonlings. And one demon, once, with a few wizards helping out."

"So you can't take it on by yourself, either. Come on, I'll help you up."

DON'T NEED TAKE ON BY SELF, a voice echoed in my head. I NEED BE A VESSEL ME. I turned to face the demon, which was either finished terrorizing the coven or bored with setting people on fire. Either way, it was facing me and taking slow, shaky steps in my direction.

I INCOMPLETE. NONE PATHETIC BEINGS THAT SUMMONED ME HEAR ME, BUT YOU CAN. THE CLOSER I GET YOU, THE STRONGER I FEEL. YESSSSS, STRONGER. YOU ARE SPECIAL YOU ARE DIFFERENT FROM THEM BUT THE SAME BUT ALSO KINDRED TO ME.

I could only stare in horror at the demon that was approaching. "Kenna, what's wrong? Snap out of it!" Jack was starting to stir, but was still unable to get up on his own.

YESSSS FEEL STRONGER. YOU WANT POWER.

I finally found my voice. "No, I don't. I didn't ask to be the way I am, but I can cope on my own just fine."

"Is it talking to you? Don't listen to anything it has to say. Just get out of here!" Jack was actually trying to get up now. I tried to help him, but the demon kept filling my head with its words.

"DANSSSSSSSSING? NO, YOU DO NOT NEED TO DANCE. YOU NEED ME. YOU ARE INCOMPLETE AND CAN BECOME COMPLETE WITH ME. YOU WILL NO LONGER NEED DANCING TO MAINTAIN BALANCE. YESSSSS YOUR HEART WANTS BALANCE. I CAN SEE YOUR SOUL AND IT IS SHAPED LIKE MINE AND I CAN SEE YOUR HEART AND IT BURNS BRIGHTLY. YOU WANT POWER. YOU NEED POWER TO FREE YOUR MOTHER AND FATHER. TAAAAAKE MEEEE.

I started to freely cry. I could feel the demon pulling at my desires and magnifying them, and I could feel the truth in his words. He could help me do everything I wanted to be able to do but was too weak to do on my own.

Jack was up on his feet now, though his hand was on the wall to support him. "Kenna, listen to me. Whatever it is telling you, it is lies or half-truths. If it is trying to make a deal with you, you must say no. If you say yes, even out of context, it will take that moment to possess you and you will die."

"But I can feel him. He can feel me and I can feel him. He's telling me the truth. He can help me rescue my mother."

"Your mother is fine. A live wardcarver is better than a dead wardcarver, no matter what side they're working for. Trust me."

YESSSSS SAY YESSSSS

"Kenna stop listening to him"

JUSSST ONE WORD

*"Stay with me Kenna."*

I covered my ears and screamed in frustration. The demon's pull on me faltered. Not long enough for me to break free entirely, but long enough that I knew that I needed to fight against him.

In the same split second that I screamed Jack dove, tucked and rolled towards the sword that Dane had cast aside earlier. He swung it at the Demon and managed to cut its arm clean off. The arm dropped to the ground and quickly burned out into nothing. I'm sure chopping an arm off like that would have been effective against a corporeal being, but this demon appeared to be made purely of fire as it promptly grew a new limb.



Jack continued to swing at the demon anyway, and I could hear it hissing as it kept getting limbs chopped off and regrowing them. I could feel that the demon was more annoyed than anything else at the fact it had to regrow limbs, and it loosened its grip on me as it turned more attention to Jack.

I ran towards the exit, terrified of the influence the demon had on me and wanting nothing more than to get away from it. I only made it a few steps into the hallway, though, before the demon noticed I was getting away and tightened its grip again. I fell to my knees and started sobbing. I couldn't get away. It put images in my head, showing me that I could run all my life and I would constantly feel that desire for power the demon had planted in my heart. It would eventually dominate my every thought and drive me mad.

I knew I couldn't go back, though. If I went back I would say yes and lose myself to the demon. I was doomed to die at the hand of this monster; my choice was whether I wanted it to be a quick death or a slow, maddening one.

"Help me... someone help me!" I sobbed.

I can help you.

The voice was distant and familiar. It was my voice, coming from the girl in the fire dress. I can help you, she repeated.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. I had only ever been able to talk with her before while I was dancing, but hoped that in a time like this, where dancing seemed less than appropriate, I could connect with her anyway.

What can I do? I asked.

I didn't hear any more words, and I didn't even see her, but I could feel her there. She showed me what I had to do.

Am I going to be okay? I asked.

I don't know. Nothing like this has ever been done before. But it's the best we've got.

I opened my eyes again, stood up, and shakily walked back to the chamber. Jack was still fighting the demon, and while the demon was unable to regenerate its limbs as quickly as before, it was clear that he still had the upper hand. Jack was breathing hard, and he swung the sword around as though it were growing heavier. Now that I wasn't scared about getting out with my life, I could survey the scene with more clarity. Cassie and Dane had not been consumed by the demon's fire, but they were still badly burned and I couldn't tell if they were still alive.

It was hot and bright in the room - both Jack and I were drenched in sweat. The paint on my face was bleeding and dripping down into my eyes and mouth. I tore the sleeves off my dress and used the cloth to wipe my face. I discarded them and stopped walking as I got just close enough to Jack's battle not to get hurt by a rogue swing of the sword.

"Jack," I shouted, "You can stop now. I've made my decision."

"No! I told you to leave! You don't know what you're saying!" He shouted back.

"Trust me! I know what I'm doing!"

The demon laughed triumphantly and in one big, sweeping motion swatted Jack across the room. It approached me and said, SSSAY IT. SSAY YESSS.

I drove all my thoughts to focus on taking in the demon. I held my hands up together. "Yes," I said quietly. The demon did not hesitate. I was quickly engulfed in his flames.

I could feel my flesh burning as he tried to take over my body. I screamed, but did not falter. I focused on making sure that this demon's power entered through my hands. I had to resist just enough that he did not overtake me all at once, but at a steady pace. I channeled his energy through my arms, up into my shoulders, into my neck. Next was the difficult part. I

focused on each of the beads in my necklace. The one for luck, the one for health, the one for protection. Then the one for light. The one for dark. As I focused the power through these beads I could feel them growing hot on my skin, the demon resisting this path. Next the one for air. The one for earth. I could feel the resistance ebbing as he traveled through the beads, but the heat was growing. The one for water. Finally, the pendant for fire. The pendant was made of fire and burned the hottest. I could feel my skin cooking under the heat, but did my best to ignore it and finish my task.

I don't know how long I was doing this for, but eventually the burning around my body stopped, my hands were no longer taking the demon in, and the heat in my arms and shoulders ebbed.

I collapsed to my knees. Jack, sword in hand, cautiously approached me. "Kenna?" He asked.

"Yeah. It's me," I coughed. My throat felt dry and hoarse.

He dropped the sword and rushed to my side. He took me in his arms and held me tightly. I winced and he loosened his grip. "Kenna, what did you do?"

"I neutralized the demon. With the wards on my necklace."

"You channeled the demon through your necklace?! That's... that's incredible! It's ingenious! And you were able to avoid having the demon in you at all?"

I tried to clear my throat, but it only drove me into a coughing fit. "No. I had to take it in first so I could channel it through the wards. I can still feel it there. It's not sentient, at least I don't think, but it's definitely there."

A worried silence passed between us. "How do I know that you're Kenna, then?"

I tried my best to elbow him. I was too weak to make it have any effect, but it got the point across. "Idiot. You're my best friend. You're wonderful. Do you really think I'd give up on you so easily?"

He smiled at that. "Touching sentiments preceded by physical abuse and name calling? That's the Kenna I know and love."

I smiled back at him, then passed out.

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I woke up in the hospital, my room lit with the bright morning light. I was sore everywhere. I tried stretching my back and felt it painfully pop several times. I did the same with my limbs and toes. It didn't feel like I had broken or torn anything, which was a relief. I probably just needed a good stretch.

My hands were a different story, though. I could feel each of my fingers wrapped up individually, and on top of that they were wrapped together. Even my thumb was wrapped in place, cotton spacing it away from my hands. The bandages went up my wrists and arms and ended at my elbows. I looked like I had cotton swabs for arms.

I tried to sit up, but as I moved my head to help center my balance I felt a sharp, painful tug at my chest and had to lie back down. I lifted up my head as far as it would go and looked around. Jack was sitting in a chair looking deep in thought, eyes closed with his elbows on his knees and chin resting on his knuckles.

I tried saying his name a couple of times. It was quiet, but he eventually heard and immediately jumped up off the chair and to my side, grabbing the cup of water and a straw for me to drink from. "I'm sorry. I was... meditating."

"Meditating, or sleeping?" I tried to whisper playfully. My throat still hurt, though the water helped soothe some of the dryness. He seemed to resent my question. "It's okay. I'm glad you're here. How long have I been out?"

"About a day and a half."

"How long have you been here?"

"I have not left your side."

I don't know why I was stunned at that. I was touched and surprised that he stayed with me. I had assumed that he would do what he did last time I ended up in the hospital and leave to continue fighting evil.

"I brought you here immediately after you passed out. Your case required a certain amount of discretion. There is a doctor here that I have come to often when I was severely injured by... unusual weapons or creatures. He comes from a long line of alchemists and can provide remedies not found many other places. I had to make sure that he was the one to help you."

"And after he had taken care of me?"

He looked sheepishly at the floor. "I... could not make myself leave without knowing you recovered well."

"Thanks. That really means a lot to me."

We were quiet for a few minutes. I reached out to him with my bandaged hand. He took the mass of gauze and tape in his own two hands and gently wrapped his fingers around it. "What can I do to make you feel better, Kenna?"

I felt tears well up in my eyes. Jack looked worried and started to gently put my hand down. "Did I hurt you? I'm sorry. I won't touch you anymore."

"No, no," I said quickly. "Please, hold my hand. I just... I can't believe how nice you are. I treated you like crap when you came back. I could see you were hurt and I wanted to help but I was so angry at you that I refused to let myself approach you. I even tried to hurt your feelings. And yet you still kept an eye on me to make sure I was safe. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I accept your apology, and I apologize for leaving you without leaving word of where I was going. I am not used to having a relationship like ours. I am used to leaving without a trace to wherever I am needed. I admit I was sad to leave you in the hospital without saying goodbye, but my duties to find who attacked you took me elsewhere."

"Where did you go?"

"Many places. I recognized the items the vampires carried on them as wards, so I traveled to Europe and Asia to find the other ward carvers. The ones in India and Italy are old and set in their ways. They rarely carve wards any more, and when they do they only carve wards they are familiar with. I spent a full day tracking down the one in Germany when I was captured. I was detained in a castle for quite some time. I was tortured for information concerning the other two wardcarvers. When I refused to say anything, Mina was flown over and given the opportunity to torture me for fun. She was only there every few days, but she liked to beat me to the brink of death.

"I did not see anyone else while I was there, but I heard many voices. The German wardcarver had been bribed into carving the wards that the vampires carried with them. He was very corrupt and quickly lost control of being able to carve functional wards. That was why your

mother was abducted and brought to Germany; her talents could help balance out the chaos the German was producing."

"If you didn't tell them about my parents, how did they know about her? Are they ever going to bring her back?"

"There was another man there. I only heard him come in once, but he seemed to be the head of the operation. He never spoke loud enough for me to understand what he was saying, but I could tell from his accent that he is American. I'm sorry; I don't have any information beyond that. And yes, your mother is back. She is actually here in the hospital herself. They would not dare to split up your parents permanently. It would effectively destroy half of the world's wardcarvers. They simply wanted to have her there to guide the German."

"She's here?! I need to see her!" I tried to get up, but the painful, sharp tugging at my chest prevented me from getting up again.

"She is fine, though emotionally damaged. I should let you know... she hasn't allowed anyone to touch her, and she hasn't said a word since she was brought back. She sustained several injuries during her time in Germany, but she shouldn't have any permanent physical damage. She was strong. I heard her refuse to design wards for them many times. They only managed to get her to design wards for them after submitting her to psychological warfare."

"How did you escape? Why didn't you take my mother with you?"

"A ghost eventually found me. She told me that you had inquired about me and your mother, and the ghosts networked out to help find us."

"Why didn't they tell me that they found you?" I interrupted.

"Humans can't see ghosts outside of areas designated for the burial or resting place for the dead. If you had simply gone back to the cemetery at any point they would have told you."

"Oh." I felt silly for interrupting Jack for a silly tangent. He let it slide, though, and continued with his story.

"The ghosts were able to describe the layout of the place to me and be lookout for my escape. I tried to find your mother, but she was heavily warded to dispel anyone not involved in this scheme of theirs to become disoriented whenever approached. I tried to find her, but ended up walking in circles. I would have continued to attempt to get her out, but I was caught. I ran, but was shot a few times before I made it to safety. I'm sure the only reason my pursuers stopped was because they assumed I would die from my wounds."

"You were shot?!"

"Yes, though not through any of my vital organs. I knew that Mina would target you and your family as soon as word got out that I had escaped, so I came here as fast as I could. She did not underestimate me the way my captors did and assumed I was still alive."

"You got here within a few hours of escaping? From *Germany*?"

"I caught a ride with a phoenix. They don't travel long distances in a conventional manner. It was almost the fastest way I could get here."

"Wow. And you still managed to fight her off with the bullet wounds?"

"I am very resilient. It's why I was able to work the vampire venom out of my system so quickly after you administered the holy water."

"So... while we're on that topic, what was that sword that Dane had?"

"I believe it was one of the artifacts that were being created in Germany by your mother and the German. I haven't had a chance to go back and retrieve the sword to study it further, but it felt like magic had been etched into it. The vampire venom was put on as added precaution, presumably against me."

"Were the candles on stage made there, too?" I already knew the answer to this question, but I deeply, deeply hoped to be proven wrong.

"I can't say for certain as I have not had a chance to study them closer, either, but from what I could see from a distance, they did not have the same patterns. I am inclined to believe that someone else carved them."

I sighed. "Thanks for being nice about it, but it's obviously my father's handiwork. This is what I don't understand - if they were already forcing my mom to draw up wards for them, why would they threaten dad so he made stuff for them, too?"

Jack gently stroked my bandaged forearm. It was soothing, which I think was the point because I did not like what he said next.

"I believe that the point of forcing your father to carve wards - and, in the case of the candles, witching symbols - was to plant a seed of corruption in him. He and your mother are still capable of carving wards, but it will be very, very difficult. She will likely be hesitant to draw up new wards, and he will have a desire to continue to carve them on his own. It will be a very long healing process for the both of them, and that's if they can continue to carve wards without any outside influences. They will likely carry scars from this incident with them for the rest of their lives. I don't know what the purpose of harming your parents in such a way is, but if I had to guess I'd say that someone doesn't want them carving wards for the immediate future."

I was silent, allowing myself to take my time to comprehend this. It was the most crushingly disappointing thing I could imagine. Would my dad ever be happy or laugh again? Would mom be able to go back to work?

"Will they at least be able to fix the wards that dad carved in our house while mom was gone? They felt... off. I think it's interfering with the good wards in our house."

"I don't know. You may have to get rid of the items that the bad wards are carved on."

"He carved wards onto the banister and on the crown moldings and on the cabinets. It's not just an issue of finding new furniture - you're talking about remodel-level overhauls here."

"That does become an issue. Well, I will make sure that someone is keeping an eye on your house. I can think of few people that would not be willing to make sure that the local wardcarvers are protected."

"Thank you. For everything. You've done so much for me and my family. I've never had a friend quite like you."

He stopped stroking my forearm and put my hand down. He gave me a sad smile and said, "Of course. That's what friends do." He stood up. "I'm going to get the doctor. He will want to see you now that you're awake." He walked out of the room. What was that all about?

The doctor came in shortly after and introduced himself as Dr. Morrison. "Good to see you're awake! Now, let's take those bandages off and see how your hands are doing."

He sat next to me and unwrapped one of my hands, then let out a low, "Whoa." I looked anxiously at him. Was that a good "whoa" or a bad "whoa"? He examined my hand closely and said, "I need you to close your eyes."

I did as he asked and waited. I could feel him flexing each of my fingers. Then he pricked the end of my middle finger with something sharp. "Ow!" I flinched and instinctively drew my hand back.

"Interesting..." Dr. Morrison mused.

"What? What's interesting?"

"When you came in your hands were burnt to a crisp. Third and fourth degree burns halfway up to your elbow. Even if your hands healed enough to still work, all the nerve endings

would have been destroyed. You were looking at a long recovery process involving multiple skin grafts. Now it looks like you're almost finished healing from first, maybe second degree burns. Let's take a look at that other hand and your chest."

My other hand had similarly healed. He peeled the bandage off my chest carefully, but I was not quite so lucky with that wound. There were nine perfectly round blisters in a U shape, right where the beads on my necklace sat. The circle on the bottom was the worst looking, where my skin had charred black.

"Well, Jack told me a bit about what happened. Can I bounce a theory off of you?" I shrugged and nodded. "You had to accept this demon's power in order to neutralize it, right? A fire demon? And according to Jack, you could still feel this demon's presence inside you"

"Yeah..."

"You were going on gut instinct. It had never been done before, and, no offense, it was probably really stupid of you to do it. I believe that you may not have been able to completely neutralize all of its power. A fire demon doesn't get burns. As such, I believe you may be hyper-resilient to burns."

"The demon... isn't neutralized?"

"Well, I believe you neutralized most of it. I took a good look at that rather remarkable piece of jewelry of yours and I believe that any threat to your well-being may be gone. The wounds on your chest suggest that the wards served their purpose to neutralize the greater part of the demon's power and influence quite well."

Oh, crap. "My necklace! Where'd my necklace go?"

"Don't panic. I kept it on me for safekeeping." He reached into his inner jacket pocket and pulled my necklace out. "Be careful with your hands. I don't know how quickly they're going to finish healing."

I held my necklace gingerly in my hands and inspected it. It had visibly gone through a beating - each of the beads were a shade darker than they had been before, and the wards looked like they had been burned in rather than carved or etched in. The pendant, though, couldn't have looked more the opposite. Instead of looking scorched, it was a bright, gleaming gold color. There was no trace of it having ever looked silver before.

"I wouldn't recommend you put it on until those blisters have scabbed over. It would only irritate your skin more and leave really nasty scars." Dr Morrison warned.

"Okay... but I need it on me. It's really important that I can wear it."

"Keep it near you, maybe in your pocket. Heck, if your hands and arms keep healing at this pace, you can probably wear it as a bracelet within the next day or so."

"Yeah... okay." I was disappointed, but I could make due.

He stood up and said, "Well, I have a special cream that you can use on your hands and chest. Lemme go whip up a batch for you and I'll have a nurse help you apply it." And with that, he left.

About an hour later a nurse came in and gently rubbed the cream into my burns. She wrapped and bandaged them up again, though thankfully not as heavily as they had been before. My hands merely looked like they were dressed up as a mummy for Halloween rather than padded like boxing gloves. Soon after another nurse came in with lunch. My throat hurt so I could only eat the mashed potatoes and the pudding, which was a shame because I was ravenous.

I took a nap shortly after and woke up again at sunset. Someone had heard I was awake and spread the word. I had a couple small bouquets of flowers sitting on the windowsill and, more

importantly, Arvin and Terra were in the room. They got up from where they were sitting and came to the side of my bed.

"Hey there, sleepyhead. How are you feeling?" Terra asked.

I tried rubbing my face, but remembered that it would probably hurt more than help when I saw my bandaged hands. I blinked several times and answered, "Not too bad. Pretty sore, but a lot of that could be from being in bed for so long. How are you guys?"

"Not too bad. We've been mostly in Mom's room today. She came back from Germany late last night. She got really sick with something nasty and had to be admitted to the hospital for dehydration and stuff. She's doing better, but she's really depressed. She won't talk to any of us and just looks out the window."

"I need to see her." I propped myself up and slowly got out of bed, trying not to pull the skin on my chest too tightly.

"You're still hooked up to an IV, I don't think you're supposed to leave," Alvin said.

I got on my feet and wavered a bit. My knees were a little weak from being off them for a couple of days. I stumbled out the door, leaning on my IV stand for support, my siblings following close behind in case I fell. Jack had been sitting outside the door and stood up when he heard the door open. He caught my elbow to steady me and said, "You really shouldn't be up."

"I'm aware. I need to see mom, though. Which way is she?" I asked.

"To the left, about four doors down," answered Terra.

I slowly shuffled my way down the hallway. I was impatient, but could only move so fast, even with Jack helping me walk. We reached the door and I pushed it open. Dad was silently sitting next to mom, holding her hand, but she was blankly looking out the window. She was emaciated and pale, and had the same dark circles under her eyes that dad had, though they weren't as dark.

"Mom?" I said.

She seemed to respond to the sound of my voice. She blinked a few times, a confused look on her face. She slowly turned her head to face where I was standing, and her mouth fell open. "Kenna?"

"Hey. How are you doing?"

"Sweetie... is that really you?"

"Yeah, I know I look a bit beat up, but it's me, and I'm fine." I walked to her side and held her hand in mine.

My mom's eyes glistened with tears. "They told me you were... that you had... I thought you were *gone*." She whispered just loud enough for me to hear.

Ah. I understood. "Terra, Arvin, Jack, can I talk with mom and dad alone for just a few minutes?"

"Why? What are you going to talk about that we can't know about?" Arvin snapped back.

"Arvin... please. It'll only take a few minutes. I understand you've been worried about your mother. I have, too. We'll all talk together in a bit. Go let a nurse know that your sister has escaped from her room so they don't raise a fuss when they discover her empty bed." Dad got up and shooed them out the door, shutting it firmly behind them.

He came back to the bedside and moved a chair so I could sit down. "Lucie, sweetheart. Can you talk? Jack told me that you were stuck in that castle. What happened?"

"I refused to draw up wards for them... they beat me when I said no. Sometimes I went so long without food and water that I thought about drawing up fake wards for them just so I

wouldn't die. I think I may have, at one point. But it obviously didn't work. They got so mad. I didn't have any food or water for days after that. No one even came to my cell to talk to me. Then someone came in and told me that they killed you, Kenna. I didn't want to believe them, but they brought a piece of your clothing with blood on it. They told me to start drawing up wards for them or they'd go after the rest of my children. I had no choice... it was so difficult, they made me draw up wards that go against everything we've built up. I feel so unclean... so *dirty*." She turned her head and looked away from us in shame.

"Mom..." I whispered. "You're not unclean. We need you... dad needs you... because you're the best of all of us. You're strong. At least you put up a fight before doing what you did..." I could feel my face growing hot in shame, realizing I did what I did willingly. There were probably ways of defeating a demon that didn't involve accepting its power. And the desire for the power and balance it had promised was probably an illusion cast by the demon. I was ashamed at how weak I was.

"Well, you're here now, and Kenna is safe. According to Jack, we should all be safe for a while. Did you see any of your captors?" Dad asked.

She shook her head. "The only person whose face I saw was Frederik's. He looked so... inhuman. His skin was all black and white, and his hair was long and tangled. He was so thin. I never saw him eat or drink. All I ever saw him do was carve wards. Everyone else was hooded. The only time they ever spoke to me was to tell me what wards they wanted, and to tell me they had... Kenna..." She trailed off sadly.

"Did you hear Americans talk to you?" I asked.

"Only one, a woman. Well, I think she was American. She had a deep, gravelly voice and an accent that may have been American. She was the one to tell me about you. Everyone else sounded like they were from somewhere else in Europe or talked too quietly for me to understand what they were saying."

I was a little disappointed, but I wasn't how it was going to have helped me if she had heard an American man there.

"But that's enough about me. What happened to you?" Mom asked me.

I told them everything that had happened, barring the part where I noticed the wards on the candles. I didn't need to make dad feel worse. By the time I was done talking Mom had a big look of surprise on her face, though Dad looked really, really guilty.

"I'm so sorry... it's all my fault," dad confessed. "I carved the spells into the candles that helped summon the demon. You have to understand, if I didn't get those candles made, they told me that they weren't going to let your mother go. I would have stood stronger if I had known they were going to force you to summon it."

"Well, I still think you did an incredible job neutralizing the demon," my mom said. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. Are you feeling okay?" I nodded. "Good. And, hey, you found your outlet for the fire inside you! I'm so proud of you, sweetie."

I was able to smile a little bit at that. I was amazed that my mom had gone through so much more physical and emotional trauma than I had, and yet she still was able to give me attention and encouragement.

"Dad? How are you doing?" I asked.

He looked away, ashamed. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not. I'm sorry, dad, but that wasn't an idle question. We had lost you there for a couple of days. You seem better, now, but really, how are you doing?"



"I'm... feeling a little more myself now that your mom's here. I'm sorry, Kenna. For everything. I realize that I treated you completely irrationally. And thank you for looking out for me. I really do appreciate it."

I leaned over to let him give me a hug.

"Well, now we have to come up with a story for what to tell Arvin and Terra." I said. "I don't even know what to tell them about my burns."

"Jack has that part covered. A fire started backstage and you got trapped behind a costume rack that had caught fire from a frayed electrical wire. Your school is quite old, after all. You tried pushing your way out, which is why your hands are so burned up. He wouldn't say if he did or not, but I think he even set a fire back stage to make the story about your hands as well as the missing members of your dance club seem legitimate. He can probably give you the details so your story matches up with the official record, and he's already explained it to Arvin and Terra," Dad explained.

"And it sounds like he got a story whipped up for mom, too. Pretty cut and dry, from what I understand. How do we explain why we needed to talk alone?" I asked.

"We stick to the truth as much as possible. Mom got a message that was horribly misinterpreted, and thought that Kenna had fallen ill and died. It also explains her depression." Dad suggested.

We invited Terra and Arvin back in and told them our story. I think they believed it, though they still seemed a little resentful that we excluded them from the original meeting. More than anything, though, they were glad that mom was talking again, and we had a wonderful family reunion.

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

After I had eaten and walked around a bit more I felt just fine, but it was a hospital rule that someone with the kind of burns I was admitted with be monitored for a minimum amount of time. I wasn't sure what the actual minimum was thanks to Dr. Morrison, who told me that he could pull some strings to help me get out by the next morning, which I thanked him for over and over.

Since I was stubborn and refused to leave my mother's side until I was threatened to forcefully be taken back to my room by a couple of male nurses, I was also stubborn enough to be able to convince Dad and Arvin and Terra to go home and sleep in their own beds. Dad had a difficult time leaving mom's side and was only convinced to leave when Dr. Morrison assured him that, since they were wardcarvers, he wasn't going to be too strict with how early my dad could come back to be with mom again.

Jack had disappeared at one point during my family's reunion and didn't come back again until late in the evening, after my family had left and my mom had received a large dose of pain killers and was sound asleep.

"I'm doing fine, now. You can go do whatever you need to as the hero of Stevens Ridge," I told him when he came in.

"I wanted to tell you something. You won't like it. Before I brought you to the hospital, I checked on Dane and Cassie to see if the demon had killed them. They were both dead and I pulled them into the prop room in hopes that someone would find them in the cleanup from the

fire. Official reports found Cassie in there, but not Dane. I went back to retrieve the sword, and it had also disappeared."

"I don't understand... is Dane still alive?"

"I have never before mistaken a live person for a corpse. My theory is that someone that knew about the chamber went in to retrieve the sword and took Dane's body. I do not know why they would want him, but I believe that his disappearance and the sword's disappearance are connected."

"I see. Well, thank you." I sat down on the edge of my bed and buried my face in my hands. I couldn't quite define how I was feeling at the moment. I was hurt because Dane had just used me for his own selfish, insane purposes. I had really, deeply liked him, but I guess he didn't feel the same, which made me angry on top of my hurt. But then there was the worry of not knowing where his body was, because even though I was hurt and angry, there was still a little part of me that looked back at how well I got along with him, and couldn't quite let go of him.

Stupid feelings.

When I looked up, Jack was walking to the door. "Where are you going?"

"I... didn't think you'd want me here. I was just going to sit watch."

"Don't want you here? What would make you think that?"

"You appeared to be grieving over the loss of your boyfriend. I... don't know how to console that sort of loss."

"Grieving? I dunno. Maybe. But let's not call him my boyfriend anymore, as he definitely would not be my boyfriend if he is still alive. Good rule to live by: boyfriends should not trick their girlfriends into summoning demons. Crap like that is harmful to a relationship. Anyway. The point is that I would rather have you in here than sitting in a folding chair right outside my door."

Jack didn't say anything. He just nodded and headed towards the big, cushy chair next to the window. But when he sat down it felt too awkward; I was probably still a couple of hours away from needing to fall asleep and he felt too far away.

"Do you wanna come sit with me?" I scooted back to the head of the bed and sat with my legs crossed, leaving plenty of room for him to sit in the middle of the bed and face me. He tentatively got up and sat across from me. I started telling him about some of the more trivial things that had happened to me in his absence, and soon he was able to relax and we were chatting away as though he had never left and I had never gotten angry at him.

About an hour and a half in we found ourselves sitting side by side, leaning against the headboard, Jack telling me about some of the more humorous of his adventures. "...so then she said that she wouldn't give me the jacket back until I made that noise again, and I had no idea what she was talking about. I tried all sorts of noises, but none of them were the ones she wanted to hear! I was just about to give up and hope that I could find a comparable jacket somewhere else, but she wasn't going to let me go until she heard that noise again. She ended up stepping on my foot and punching me in the gut at the same time, and I have to say, even at a young age the dragonkin are pretty strong and it hurt. Apparently the noise I made was what she wanted to hear, because she went into a laughing fit and gave my jacket back."

"So... you let a little girl beat you up to get your jacket back?"

"Hey. First of all, she was dragonkin. Second of all, have you seen my jacket? It is a really, really nice jacket."

"True, true," I agreed and giggled. Without thinking, I put my head on his shoulder. At the same time I realized that maybe this was too much and started to sit back up, he put his arm around my shoulders and rested his cheek on top of my head. I tensed up, and I know he knew it, yet he still kept his arm around me. I had a flashback to the night of the ghost party; how he kissed my hand, and how I didn't know what to make of it.

We just sat like that for a few minutes. I relaxed, and quietly asked, "Jack? You've mentioned before that you're cursed. What did you mean by that?"

He didn't answer at first. He gently squeezed my shoulder and said, "I'll explain it to you someday. You're weak and tired right now, though. Today is not the day."

"No. I'm only here because leaving so soon after being admitted for third degree burns is suspicious. Please, tell me. You know I won't let it go."

He sighed. "Yes, I know." He paused to collect his thoughts, took a deep breath, and started his story.

"First of all, I don't like talking about it because of the fact that it shakes the faith of humans. Are you a person of faith?"

I shrugged my one shoulder. "Kind of. I believe in a god. At least one, anyway. It's kind of hard to say."

"Do you believe in heaven or hell? In the soul?"

"Well, I've seen ghosts, and the Eldraif. Obviously there's a soul. I just assumed that once I died I'd become a ghost. I'm not too happy about the idea of continuing on forever, but I can deal with it. So I just assumed that there wasn't a heaven or hell."

"I see. Well, then, maybe you don't want to hear this just yet."

"What? No! Of course I do!" I poked him in the side, nudging him on.

"Fine, then. I did warn you. Now, as you've seen a vampire's soul is very, very evil and very, very corrupt. While many of them are clever, there really isn't a lot of thought behind what they do. They want to instill as much evil in the world as possible, and whether that is through hatred or anger or grief, they'll do whatever they need to in order to spread corruption. Because of that, once a vampire's body can no longer house a soul, the soul goes to hell. The longer the vampire lived, or the more corruption the human had in life prior to becoming a vampire, the deeper into hell the soul goes.

"A half vampire is a wholly unique being in many, many ways. We are everything that vampires would be if they had any sort of life to them. Vampires are resistant to injury, and combined with the human ability to heal, we become very difficult to incapacitate indeed. We live for a very, very long time, and have an extraordinary amount of strength. We have the ability to discern where magic is and perform a bit ourselves.

"This all seems like a great gift, but none of it matters. I have the corruption of a vampire in me, and I have to deal with those consequences. Many cultures in the magic community treat me like some sort of pariah, not wanting me to be near them for fear of corrupting their own. When I die my soul will go to hell."

I sat straight up at that and turned to face him. "No! There's no way! Your father should have nothing to do with where you go! You do so much good, protecting everyone and killing vampires! You must have it wrong!"

He shook his head sadly. "It's the truth. You don't have to believe it, but the fact of the matter is that once I die, my soul will be spending the rest of eternity in hell."

"No... no! You're wrong! You have to be wrong! Can't you just become a ghost instead?"

"Ghosts are the souls of people who don't believe in heaven or hell, or are too afraid to move on. I am aware of what lies beyond death, and I have come to accept it. The best I can do is spend my life doing good in hopes that I can spend time on the outskirts of hell. That's the goal of all half vampires - attempt to redeem ourselves to minimize our punishment. This is why we spend our lives traveling around, slaying vampires and other evil beings."

I threw my arms around him and buried my face in his chest. "No... no... I won't let you. I'll find a way to get you to heaven."

He put his arms around me. "Don't worry. It won't be for a long, long time. You won't have to worry about it by then."

"But... what if I go to heaven? I don't want to go to heaven if you're not there!" I gasped a little and buried my face in his chest again, embarrassed I had let that slip.

He said nothing and kept his arms around me. Soon he started stroking my head and playing with my hair, sending shivers down my spine. I looked up into his eyes, trying to read what emotions he was feeling. I always had such a difficult time telling what he was thinking, and this time was no different. Up this close I could see that his eyes were actually a blue color, not the grey they had always looked to me. He put his hand on my cheek and gently stroked my face. He finally allowed emotion to show through – he was sad and confused, and he looked at me as though he were looking at something very precious to him.

"Kenna," he whispered, "you are so unique. I've never met anyone I can talk to like I can with you. You're charming, funny, and so beautiful..." He leaned in closer, our faces almost touching...

The door handle clicked open. In a flash Jack sat up straight and righted me as well, a decent way away from him so it looked like we were both just sitting, instead of nearly laying with each other. Dr. Morrison walked in, a nurse trailing close behind, and looked up from the chart he had in hand.

"I'm sorry, Jack, but I'm going to ask you to get off the bed. Those beds are really only made for one person, and right now that person needs to be Makenna. Up up up."

Jack slid off the bed, turned to me and said, "I'll be sitting just outside if you need me." Before I could protest, he hurried out the door.

"I'm doing my final rounds before I leave for the night. Are you in pain? Have you experienced any changes since I last checked in on you?"

"Yes... I mean no! No. I'm fine."

"Good. Rebecca is going to check your vitals and let you go to sleep, then, okay?"

I nodded. The nurse checked my temperature, breathing, then put the blood pressure sleeve around my arm.

"You nervous, sweetie? It's not a test, you know."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Don't worry about it. Most people get nervous around nurses and doctors. You're blood pressure is a little high, that's all. I'll come back in a few minutes to recheck. Do some deep breathing exercises until then, mmkay?"

I nodded, still feeling a little dazed. She left, and I flopped back on my bed and breathed out a long breath. Well, that answered my question about how he felt about me. How did I feel about him? He was my best friend; that had been established many times over. He was entirely too old for me, that was also for certain.

It still didn't change the fact that I was going to let him kiss me.

When the nurse came back my blood pressure was almost back to normal. She told me to make sure I was drinking enough water, and left me for the night, switching the lights off on her way out. I waited at least a good half hour before getting up again. I wandered over to my door, tiptoeing as quietly as I could. I leaned against the door, resting my forehead against the cool wood. All I could hear were the normal sounds of a hospital. Of course Jack wouldn't be making any noise. He had trained himself better than that. I reached for the door handle, then stopped myself. What was I going to do? What was I going to say?

I drew my hand back and went back to bed. I slept restlessly that night. When I was woken up in the morning to be checked out, Jack was nowhere to be seen.



My hands had completely healed, though Dr. Morrison recommended I keep them wrapped up for at least another week so as not to arouse suspicion. Mom had to stay in the hospital for another few days, due to her malnourishment and dehydration. Her kidneys and lower intestines had been damaged because of her diet (or lack thereof), and she needed steroids pumped into her to help with the pain and the recovery.

I was allowed to stay home from school for a couple of days, but I ended up getting bored after the first day and going to school on the second day anyway. I was lucky that it was winter and I could get away with wearing long sleeves and gloves - after the first two class periods of everyone - and I mean EVERYONE - asking about my bandages I got extremely aggravated and just kept my jacket and gloves on through each class period.

A memorial was planned for that Thursday for all the students that died in the "stage fire" at the dance. I was offered a chance to give a few words, but I declined and faked post traumatic stress to get out of it. I had been doing it a lot, lately, just to avoid talking about the dance. I even avoided going to the dance club, just to maintain the illusion that I was emotionally scarred from the ordeal.

It was only half a lie, really. I tried getting dressed for practice that Wednesday, but once I started getting things out of my dance bag I started feeling anxiety build up and I quickly stuffed everything back in the bag. I started questioning how good of an idea it would be to dance, seeing as how I had already caused enough damage by doing so. Not only that, but how did I *know* that the demon inside me no longer had any sort of consciousness? What if it was just asleep, waiting for me to do something to wake it up? I walked home that day, since I didn't have my bike and the busses had all left by the time I got to the bus loading area.

Jack was nowhere to be seen that whole week. Neither was Mina, for that matter. I started to worry about him, but when I got home that Wednesday there was a note on my desk.

*Kenna –*

*I had to take off for a bit. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I'll be back soon.*

*Jack*

I folded it up and put it in my pocket. I spent the rest of the day reaching into my pocket and touching it, making sure it was there.

Mom returned home late that afternoon. I made dinner that night – it was the first homemade dinner I had had since dad had completely lost it. I'd mostly been buying ready to eat meals from the grocery store for myself and Alvin, since dad had been spending every waking moment (and even some non-waking moments) at the hospital and was eating the cafeteria food.

Dad had given me a list of foods the doctor gave him that were going to be the best things for mom to eat until her digestive system could manage to handle processing anything she ate. It looked like we were going to be eating soup for a week or so. Minestrone was a comfort food of mine, so that's what I whipped up for the family.

Terra joined us, though she announced during dinner that she had signed a contract at the apartment her friend lived at and was going to be rooming there from then on. It was pretty depressing, but the mood was already pretty sullen so it was hard to say that it had gotten any worse after Terra's announcement. Mom hadn't spoken much at all since our initial conversation in the hospital. She looked healthier in that she was eating, but she still looked pale in the skin and dark around the eyes. She was hunched over at dinner, constantly pulling her blanket tighter around her shoulders.

Dad was just as quiet, and spent most of the meal with his hand on mom's shoulder, babying her whenever she went too long without taking a bite. It was, to be completely honest, extremely pathetic. I could tell that mom was irritated that dad was treating her like an invalid, but she had a hard time protesting as she knew that she probably was that way, to an extent. What's worse is that dad hardly looked fit to take care of himself. He was still awfully pale and didn't speak much himself. The conversation at the hospital had been encouraging and uplifting at the time, but it was painfully obvious that both of my parents had made little to no improvement at all.

I cleaned up all the dishes after dinner and put on a movie in the living room for anyone that wanted to watch. Arvin was pretty much done with worrying about mom and dad – whether it was because mom was back or because worrying made him tired I wasn't sure. I didn't blame him – I was getting pretty tired myself, wondering if dad was actually going to get better now that mom was back, and how long it was going to take mom to get better, if at all. They sat in the living room once I told them I had gotten a movie going, but I could tell they weren't paying attention. Dad was looking at mom the whole time, trying to take her hand, but whenever he touched her bare skin she shivered and tried to curl up into a tighter ball. She just stared off into the distance, as though there was something watching her, and she needed to keep it in her sight.

I let them sit in the living room that night, not bothering to suggest they go to bed. I went to bed early myself, and while I went to sleep quickly, it certainly wasn't soundly.

The next day was the day of the memorial. All the class periods were cut ten minutes short so we could have an assembly at the end of the day. Once the bell to dismiss the final class rang, I slipped away from the crowd heading toward the gymnasium and headed towards the closest exit so I could walk home. I almost made it, but when I rounded the corner I almost ran straight into a large man in a long, heavy grey woolen coat.

“Whoa! Where are you off to in such a hurry?” He asked me.

I shrugged. “Assemblies aren't mandatory. I knew the people who died pretty well, I don't need the assembly to tell me what kind of people they were or how much they'll be missed.”

“You wouldn't by chance be Makenna Reyvens, would you?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I'm glad I ran into you. I have a few questions for you, if you don't mind.”

“Why?”

“Mind if we sit down somewhere a little warmer?”

“Can I ask who's asking?”

He chuckled. “I see you're not going to let this rest, are you? My name is Inspector Gregory. I've been looking into the fire and would just like to ask you some questions so I can get a better picture of what happened.”

“I was passed out for most of it, you know. I’m really not the person to ask.”

“I’m aware. Just a couple questions, it’ll take less than five minutes.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. You’re going to be disappointed, though.”

We went to the nearest unlocked door, which happened to be the front office. Everyone – staff included – was at the assembly, so it was completely deserted. He sat down in one of the chairs in the waiting area and motioned for me to do the same.

“Now, then, can you tell me what happened after the dance show?”

“I went to go grab my water bottle out of my bag so I could grab a drink before the final bow. I saw Cassie, Katie, Lindsay, Leah and Dane go into the prop room. I followed them to see why they weren’t going to participate in the final bow, but on my way there a frayed electrical wire brushed up against a rack of costumes and caught fire. I suppose it started out pretty small, because we were chatting in the prop room long enough that we didn’t notice the smoke at all. Of course, by then the curtains had caught fire. When we left the prop room we were pretty much trapped in. I tried to push my way out, but the fire was too hot. Hence, my burns. After that I passed out.”

“Do you know why you’re alive?”

“Jack managed to find a way in and drag me out.”

“Jack, huh?” He got out his notebook and flipped through the pages. “I have written down here that a person named Clive brought you to the hospital.”

“Really? Well, that must be who found me, then. I didn’t actually see who found me or who checked me in, after all. Jack is a close friend of mine and was at the hospital when I woke up, so I assumed it was him.”

“Uh-huh. Do you have any idea why Jack would only save you, and none of the others?”

“You mean Clive?” I could see what this man was trying to do. I had let slip that Jack had rescued me, and he was now trying to get me to confirm that it was him.

“Yes, of course. Clive.”

“I honestly don’t know. I don’t even know who this Clive person is. A teacher, maybe? Anyway. Maybe I looked the most likely to pull through. I can’t tell you what he was thinking.”

“I see. Did you know what happened to the bodies of your fellow club members?”

I put on the saddest face I could muster and tried to get into post traumatic stress mode.

“No, and I’ve been trying to avoid talking about it. I’ve had nightmares about burning to death every night since then, and I hate to think that some of my friends actually went through that. Please, I’d rather you not tell me.”

“I understand, but this is important to the investigation. Just try to answer, will you?” He had lowered his voice to sound more soothing. I nodded almost imperceptively. “Cassie was found with almost no burns at all. Coroners determined cause of death as asphyxiation. The others, though, were burned beyond recognition. We were able to find enough teeth to match up most of their dental records. Do you know how hot and how long it takes for a fire to burn human bones into ashes?” I shook my head, no. “It takes several hours at almost two thousand degrees for bone to burn to ash. Your school auditorium burned for less than an hour and only at a few hundred degrees before this ‘Clive’ fellow reported the fire. How odd is it, then, that there were so few remains?”

I dabbed delicately at the corners of my eyes, wiping away imaginary tears. “I don’t know! Why are you even asking me? I already feel guilty enough about their deaths! I was the one that kept them there for so long! I asked them for feedback on the performance since it was my first one ever, and we ended up going over all the performances instead.”

“Why were you in the prop room?”

“I don’t know! That’s what they chose! I guess it was tradition or something! Are you done asking me questions yet?” I was starting to breathe in and out quickly, faking hyperventilation.

“Yes, yes, I’m done. I’m sorry to bother you. Are you going to be okay?” I shrugged as sadly as I could. “Well, I’m sorry for your loss. Can I talk to you again sometime in the future?”

“I’d rather you not.”

“I understand. Well, thank you for your time.” He held his hand out for me to shake. First the thing with Jack, and now this? This guy really didn’t trust me.

I held my hands up and said, “Sorry, but they still hurt. Shaking hands is on my list of no-nos for now.”

“Of course. How could I forget.” Inspector Gregory let himself out the door. I saw him look from side to side, then shove his hands in his pockets, walking toward the parking lot.

I waited for a few minutes before letting myself leave. It was a really odd encounter, to say the least. While I tried not to take crime television shows as law, they were at least good enough to tell me one thing – Inspector Gregory thought that there was foul play behind the deaths of the seven members of the dance club. I don’t know who he suspected, but he definitely thought I knew something more than I was letting on.

I took my time walking home. I wasn’t looking forward to another night of sullen parents and awkward dinner. I wondered what I could make that would take even less time than throwing a bunch of canned vegetables together for a soup. By the time I got home I decided that I could stand making soup again, and that I’d do the extra work to get ingredients together for slow cooker chicken for the next day, which would then require almost no preparation on my part when I got home from school.

Sure enough, the afternoon went much the way it did the afternoon previous. It was starting to get awfully depressing, and that night I had nightmares about being surrounded by a cold, blue fire that froze whatever it touched.

With everything that had been going on, I had forgotten that it was Christmas time. Nearly all my classes had Christmas parties instead of the normal lesson on Friday, since it was the last day before winter vacation. It was pleasant enough, but I had a hard time really appreciating them. I tried to have fun, especially in the classes I had with Nobuko, but it was difficult for the both of us. Since not everyone actually knew the members of the dance club that had died, their deaths didn’t weigh on their minds. I could tell that Nobuko was having a hard time coping with the incident – after all, she had made many friends once she joined the club. She gave me a consoling hug at one point during the day, and I hugged her back, though I felt like I was deceiving her in a way. I needed help coping with what happened after the dance show, though not for the same reasons she did. What I needed was for Jack to come back so I could talk with him more.

I took my time going from class to my locker when the dismissal bell rang. I should have hurried up to ensure I didn’t miss the bus, but something was causing me to hang back. I wandered the halls aimlessly, trying to figure out what it was.

I passed by the gym and something clicked. No, I told myself. I’m not going to do that. Not yet. Possibly not ever. But that nagging feeling persisted. I looked around quickly to make sure there wasn’t any administration on patrol, and snuck in to the gym, heading straight to the dance studio.



[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I hadn't done any real dancing since the winter show. I knew I should have wanted to, but there was something comforting about wearing my necklace. I was pretty sure that I had neutralized the demon. After all, I hadn't felt any desire to go out and wreak havoc or take over the world or anything, but I still had this tiny bit of doubt in the back of my mind that maybe it was just because I had been wearing my necklace non-stop around my wrist and that if I took it off something bad would happen.

I didn't want to admit it, but there was also a fear in the back of my mind that I would only do more harm than good by dancing. After all, I was directly responsible for the death of so many people because of my performance. Even though Jack had told me that it wasn't really my fault, that there was no way I could have known that I was a pawn in their sick plan to summon a demon, there was no denying that they couldn't have done it without me.

But I told myself that it was either face my fears and dance or live with a constant reminder around my neck that I would rather artificially keep myself balanced than live my life to the fullest. Besides, I reminded myself, the first time I realized that dancing was the key to balance in my life was after getting bit by a vampire, and dancing had cleansed myself of the nightmares I had that were associated with that experience. Maybe dancing would help cleanse myself of these doubts, too. I'm sure that that's what the me in the fiery dress would say.

I slipped my makeshift bracelet off my wrist and made little, hesitant steps to the beat of the music. The steps became bolder as I got into the music, and soon I was able to fall into the deep trance I found myself in any time I danced. I reached out to the inner me, the one with the brightly-colored dress.

I'm here, I said. I'm trying to heal.

You came to the right place, I heard her voice say.

I was thrown for a loop. Her voice was different. It was still mine, but just a tiny bit deeper.

Brace yourself for something really awesome, she said.

I kept dancing, just me in the dark for a few seconds, when suddenly I was almost blinded by a pillar of fire that spontaneously flared up in front of me. The pillar of fire disappeared, and left the inner me there.

She was wearing a fire dress. I mean, I had described her dress as fiery before, but just because it was shorter than constantly thinking of it as 'the red and orange and yellow dress sewn to look like a flickering candle when dancing'. Now her dress *was* fire. She wasn't on fire, it was that it looked like someone had found a way to make fire into a cloth and had cut out a pattern to sew into the dress she was now wearing.

She looked different, too. Taller, a bit more toned, longer hair, and slightly sharper facial features. Still like me, but... older, maybe?

Pretty neat, huh? She asked me.

Wow. *Wow*, was all I could muster out.

It happened after you defeated the demon. Before you ask, no, I don't think that this is any of the demon's power. I mean, I'm not going to rule out the possibility, but it just doesn't feel like it. It feels more like... that maybe... hmm. I'm not sure how to describe it, really. Um. Okay. I did my best to help you channel that fire demon's power, and as he did have to inhabit us in order for us to guide him to the wards, there was a certain amount of interaction between

me and him involved. I got to pick his brain, if you will. And seeing some of the things he knew helped me gain this knowledge of how to control fire. Except I didn't get it from him. It was more like it reminded me of something I already knew but had forgotten. I still have a feeling like I'm not remembering something, but this is definitely a start.

So... who are you, then? You dodged the question last time I asked, but now you're talking as though you're not a part of me. You look and sound different, too.

Honestly, it's because I didn't know the answer last time. I still don't know who I am, but I'm pretty sure that I am a part of you. I'm still me, but I'm also you. Yikes. This is also difficult to describe. My theory is that I am my own being, but I couldn't be myself if it weren't for you, and I think that the same goes for you, too. I don't know anything you don't know, and you know everything I know, but a lot of it is buried deep in your subconscious.

So... you are a part of me and you wouldn't exist if it weren't for me, but you have your own sense of self beyond that?

Yeah. And don't forget, you wouldn't be you without me.

Do you have a name?

Of course. You have a name, so I have a name.

Your name is Makenna?

Yep!

Can we agree on a nickname so we don't get confused?

Sure. You can call me Lady Brightfire, Goddess of the Burning Sun and Ruler of All.

Umm...

I'm kidding. Brightfire does sound good, though. Kind of like a superhero name. HEY you should become a vigilante and use that as your super identity! Ha ha. Seriously, though, I'm good with anything. Azar, Fiametta, Nina, Hreghen, Urit, Huo, Adena - they all mean fire. Adena's good, I think. By the way, you're totally on fire.

What?

Nobuko's freaking out. Just thought you'd like to know.

Leaving it at that, she danced off into the dark, leaving glowing footprints behind her. I shrugged it off and kept dancing, but after a few seconds I heard a screaming in the distance. I opened my eyes and realized that the screaming was coming from someone in the room with me. I stopped dancing and looked towards the source. Nobuko was in the studio next to the door. She had stopped screaming, but was staring at me, open-mouthed in shock.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"You... were on fire. Your feet! But... are they burned?"

I looked down at my bare feet. They looked normal. I lifted one up to look at the bottom and see if maybe the heel looked burned. It was a nice, normal pink color, but the wood under where I had been standing was most definitely not okay. There was a foot-shaped spot that had charred through the varnish and into the wooden floor. I looked around the rest of the studio. Sure enough, there were black footprints all around the studio.

Oh. I see. Adena and Nobuko weren't complimenting me. My feet were actually on fire. Well, this was an interesting development.

"WHAT IS GOING ON?!" Nobuko shouted.

"That... is a very, very long story. *Very* long. It ends with me apparently unlocking some sort of ability to spontaneously produce fire that doesn't actually burn me, though the dance floor doesn't take too kindly to it. Yikes. I hope I can fix that. So what brings you here?"

"I was trying to look for you, wanted to know if you needed a ride home. I couldn't find you, I even started driving to your house. I came here, thinking maybe you'd be just crazy enough to stay after school at the start of winter break... before we change the subject too much, *what the hell do you mean you can spontaneously produce fire?*"

"Ah. Ha ha," I chuckled nervously. Was there any way of getting around the truth? I doubted it. "Long story short, my parents can do magic, they named me and my siblings after the elements, I was named after fire and have had an affinity for it, so during the winter show I summoned a fire demon - TOTALLY didn't mean to, but there you go - and then I had to defeat it and when I did I unlocked some sort of subconscious knowledge on how to summon fire I THINK but who really knows."

She looked at me blankly for several moments, then angrily said, "Did you set the stage on fire after the show? Is that what you're trying to do now? You know, I thought you were a good person. Maybe a bit mean from time to time, but for the most part really nice and honest. I guess I was wrong." She turned around to leave and put her hand on the door handle.

"Nobuko, wait! I know it sounds crazy, but really, I can explain!" She ignored me and pushed on the door handle. In the split second that I heard the handle click open, my heart stopped beating in panic. In the very next moment - maybe even the same moment? - Nobuko let out a little shriek and jumped away from the door, waving her hands around in pain. The handle was a deep, glowing red color, though was quickly fading back to its silver color.

"Sorry! Sorrysorrysorrysorry!" I said quickly as I ran to her side to help. She was blowing on her palm, which was already a deep red color and had small blisters forming on the pressure points of her palm. I didn't know for certain that I was the one that caused the door handle to burn her, but I wasn't going to start ruling out the possibility that I had, no matter how unintentional.

I gently but firmly grabbed her hands to inspect them. She tried pulling away at first, but I gave her a disapproving look and she let me take them. They were really red and already developing blisters.

"Oh crap. Oh crap oh crap oh crap," I said over and over. I was panicking - maybe dancing wasn't going to work for me anymore. Maybe I was going to start spontaneously setting things on fire if I wasn't wearing my necklace. I felt terrible that I had hurt poor, sweet Nobuko.

I could hear a whispering inside my head. It was Adena, who apparently didn't need me to ask for help any more for her to volunteer her expertise. Try healing her, she said.

How? I don't have any medicine. I'll have to take her to Doctor Morrison.

Take away the fire from her hands.

*They aren't on fire*, I replied, irritated.

That doesn't mean they don't feel like they're on fire.

Fine. *Fine*.

I dropped one of Nobuko's hands and took the other one in both of mine. I closed my eyes, and felt how hot the skin of her palm felt under mine. I focused on taking the heat from her hand into mine, like a scaled-down version of what I did with the demon. It didn't do anything at first, and Nobuko tried pulling her hand away, but I caught her wrist and said, "No. Just gimme a minute."

She relaxed enough that I didn't have to restrain her, but I could still feel the tension in her hands. I gently cradled it palm side up in one hand, and I laid my other palm on hers and focused again on trying to take away the heat in her palm. This time I could slowly feel my palm growing warm, and hers growing cool beneath mine.

When I was pretty sure I was done, I opened my eyes and looked at her palm again. There were still blisters, but they were smaller and her skin was no longer red. Nobuko stared at her hand in disbelief. While she was distracted with that, I took her other hand and did the same thing.

My hands felt like they were burning, but the burning feeling was gradually going away. At the rate they were healing themselves, they'd feel back to normal within a half hour. They didn't even look bad.

"What... *what?*" Was the only thing Nobuko could manage to say.

"Your guess is as good as mine. How do your hands feel?"

"Fine - It doesn't even feel like they were burned. The blisters don't even hurt that much!"

"Great! I'm just finding out all sorts of cool stuff about myself today. Hey, I wonder if I can fix the floor..." I walked over to a charred spot on the floor and put my hand on top of it. I tried taking away the burn, but it was harder to get the process started than it had with Nobuko's hand, and after a few seconds the heat was too much for me to bear. I drew my hand back with a sharp breath in and shook it out. My hand was definitely red, and it was probably going to take a full hour instead of a half hour for the hotness to fade away. The scorch mark had only barely faded away, too. I was disappointed.

I turned back to Nobuko. "So. Since there's really no making up a logical explanation for this, and since I've already given you the Cliffs notes version of all this anyway, would you like to hear the unabridged version?"

She looked at me as though I was a monster (I didn't blame her), then nodded slowly. We grabbed some fast food on the way to my house and ate up in my room.

I explained as much as I felt was reasonable, from how long I'd been aware of my connection to fire to what happened after the dance show. It required me to leave out a lot of stuff that perhaps would have provided clarification to my past behavior, but Jack's parentage was not my secret to tell, and without explaining his paternity his role in my adventures didn't make any sense, so in the end I had to glaze over much of my story. I felt bad, but I remembered what Jack said about people going mad once they learned about the magic world, so I tried to lead her to believe that maybe it was just a weird coincidence that my wardcarver parents moved into a town where some kids were able to find a way to practice real magic and that it was almost unreal that an actual demon materialized. I also left out the part where Dane was missing, since she took it hard enough that almost half of the dance club were killed by something she wouldn't have even believed in if she hadn't seen what I was able to do.

She left my house after asking only a few questions, claiming that she was starting to feel sick. I didn't blame her, and let her know that she was welcome to talk to me at any time. Not that she wanted to have anything to do with me for a while, I was sure, but I tried to give her the impression that I was still me, just able to manipulate fire in a way I hadn't been able to before. She gave me a halfhearted smile and said, "Yeah, okay. Thanks."

The weekend went just as badly as the previous couple of afternoons. The most I could do was just make sure that mom and dad were led to the dining area three times a day for food and water. They didn't spend all their time on the living room couch; sometimes they would go to the workroom, presumably to try and come up with something new to carve, or maybe even something they were familiar with, just to get back in the normal flow of life, but they were never there for more than a half hour at a time, and mom usually came back with really red eyes as though she had been crying, and dad came back looking exhausted.

I ended up calling Nobuko on Saturday in hopes that maybe she would still be willing to be my friend. She seemed to have recovered a bit, and I ended up hanging out with her for most of Saturday afternoon. We went back to the consignment shop and tried to goof off, trying on the ugliest dresses we could find, but we couldn't maintain a lighthearted mood at all. We settled on going to her house and watching a depressing romance movie. I didn't like romances at all, normally, but there was something so ridiculously tragic about the movie that I was able to lose myself in the story and tolerate it for a couple of hours.

I had to go home earlier than I would have liked to, but her family was taking the winter break as an opportunity to go back to Japan and visit some family there, so she needed to take time to pack her bags.

When Monday rolled around I found myself growing more and more depressed about my situation. All of my closest friends were – or had been – in the dance club. Nobuko was out of the country; the girls that were still alive were preparing for the swiftly coming Christmas day with family traditions or shopping for last minute gifts.

My family did normally celebrate Christmas, but to me this year the idea of celebrating felt forced. Besides, we hadn't received any word from Ammon as to whether he would be joining us or not, so there wasn't much motivation to even try to pretend. Arvin seemed really upset, especially when he realized that we wouldn't even have presents to open, so Christmas Eve we set out early in the day to buy a couple of presents for everyone as well as food for a traditional Christmas dinner. We "borrowed" mom's bank card and were actually able to pull together a decent haul for Christmas day. We got a bunch of nice scarves for mom, a bunch of CDs and DVDs for dad, and a jewelry box for Terra, who broke away from her new apartment long enough to actually spend the day with us. I got Arvin a ten gallon fish tank and equipment, plus some water frogs and a couple of fancy gold fish to go with it. He was really surprised by it - he never kept pets, but now that I knew about our elemental connections I figured that he'd be more than capable of taking care of some small water animals on his own. He found some really fantastic origami paper for me as well as a book on some of the more difficult folds, and I was fairly touched by the thoughtfulness of the gift.

Mom and dad were healing enough that they weren't just sitting on the couch all day any more, and having a traditional Christmas morning seemed to help quite a bit. They still didn't talk a lot, and they had yet to leave the house, but mom helped me out with making Christmas dinner, so I was starting to feel hope that all was not lost. It ended up a disaster, by the way - I had never roast a turkey before, and I somehow managed to get it burnt and dry on the outside and undercooked in the middle. Everyone was really nice about it, though, and ate at least one piece of the burnt and dry parts. The rapidity we went through the gravy may or may not have directly correlated to the dryness of each piece.

We stayed up late to drink hot chocolate and watch a Christmas movie, and by the time Terra bid us goodbye it was nearly midnight. I went to my room feeling content once everyone turned in, and while "content" isn't necessarily "good", it was certainly better than the "worried that child services is going to take me and Arvin away" mood I'd been in for almost two weeks.

While I was pretty tired, I was also feeling curious as to whether or not ghosts celebrated Christmas, so I pulled my chair up to my window and sat patiently, hoping it wouldn't be in vain. One o'clock rolled around and ghoulishly green figures started appearing on the far side of the cemetery. Within a half hour the cemetery was fairly full - there weren't as many ghosts there as there had been at the party I had attended a couple months previous, but there was still a fair turnout.

I almost dozed off, but a thunk against my window startled me awake. I sat up quickly, scared that someone was trying to break in. No one was directly in front of my window, so I looked out and around. Jack was perched on the fence, another pebble in hand.

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

I was excited to see him since it had been about a week and a half since I left the hospital, and did my best to ignore all uncertainty I had from our previous encounter. I was in my pajamas and there was lots of snow outside, so I motioned to him that I would be a few minutes. I got into more weather-appropriate clothes and sneaked downstairs, where my snow boots and heavy coat were. I peeked in to my parents' room on the way out - they were sleeping fitfully, but they were both there and both asleep, which is what mattered to me.

I got out to the backyard and Jack jumped off the fence. "I apologize that I did not tell you where I was, I was—"

"Don't worry about it," I interrupted. "You left a note, and that's what really matters. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I am. How are your wounds coming along?"

"Fine. I'm going to have permanent scars where my necklace was, but the worst part is over. Doctor Morrison gave me a really good ointment and I can even almost wear my necklace like normal again. And my hands were completely back to normal the day after I was let out of the hospital, see?" I took off one of my gloves and held it up so he could see.

"That is good," he commented and smiled.

"So why are you here at this late hour? I mean, I'm really happy to see you, but it's still pretty late."

"I apologize. I should have realized you had fallen asleep when you did not notice me out here. I saw you at your window and assumed you were awake. I'll let you go back to sleep now..."

"No! No, it's fine. The chilly air is more than enough to keep me awake. What's going on?"

"The ghosts are having a Yule party. I was passing through on my way back from my last excursion, and they invited me to stay and requested that I ask you to join us as well."

"Oh," I said, hopefully not too sullenly.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked, having picked up on my reluctance.

"No, well, I mean... last time I went to a party of theirs, they lost so many, and it was because of me. And... that vampire..." I trailed off.

"Ah. I see. Well, you have every right to refuse the invitation, but I can assure you that none of the ghosts blame you for what happened, otherwise they would not have requested your presence. As for vampires and other dangers - Christmas is a holy day, and creatures of evil have a difficult time leaving their homes on holy days. While midnight has passed, the purity of Christmas will linger until dawn. Even if your parents' wards were not still working - which they are - you'd be very safe. I do not want to pressure you, of course," he hastily added.

"Okay... well... I guess there's no harm in going..."

"May I?" he asked, holding an arm out to me. I nodded, and he wrapped his arm around my waist. With his free hand he grabbed the top of the fence, and easily vaulted the both of us over.

The party was pleasant enough; the musicians provided Christmas music as background noise, not as dancing music, and while we did play some fun party games, the whole thing felt more like a meet and greet compared to the raucous bash I had previously attended.

Several hours passed, then a ghost came around and signaled to the others that we were talking with. I tried asking Jack what was going on, but he just shushed me and told me to watch.

All the ghosts gathered together and held their hands up in the air, then started singing:

*Silent Night, Holy Night,  
All is calm, all is quiet.  
May we keep in remembrance  
All that shines with pure cleanliness;  
Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.*

One by one, the ghosts disappeared. When they were all gone and all was quiet I said quietly to Jack, "I don't remember that verse. Is that new?"

He shook his head. "Actually, it's the original *Silent Night*. It's a prayer of sorts, to help remind them of the first holy day as well as to keep from getting angry, and thereby corrupt or restless. It turned into a holy hymn only after the original song was conceived."

"Wait... so... if that song was written before the original Christmas night... than what makes this night a holy night?"

He motioned for me to walk with him around the now-empty graveyard. "It's part of a weeklong ritual. It is said that long ago the evil spirits in the world ran free after the summer equinox, claiming that it was their right to be unopposed after the days were ruled by the sun for so long. They were supposed to back off and allow the good beings to take over again after the winter equinox in order to restore balance in the world, but after many, many centuries, they pushed that date further and further back, claiming that with the nights still so long, they were entitled to remain free and in power. The beings of good protested, but since they had almost all of humanity on their side, they did not think they would lose control. After all, humans prefer day to night, and most are inherently good. Soon the beings of evil were reigning the earth for most of the year, and the world was quickly shifting out of balance.

"One year the beings of good had seen how far they had fallen, and how corrupt humanity was becoming. A single man could be capable of taking over half of the known world; societies were practicing human sacrifice; plagues and diseases were rampant; intellectuals were condemned as evil, and those claiming they were working in the name of their gods were praised as vessels of divine power. They knew the corrupt would not easily give up what they had so cleverly won, and so, on winter equinox, the two sides met in battle. The battle lasted for five days, and while there were heavy casualties on both sides, the side that stood for all that was good and pure was losing, for their morale was quickly fading. On the fifth day, when all seemed lost, angels descended from heaven and gave much-needed aid to the side of good. With the angels on their side, those fighting for good found strength they didn't know they had, and they were quickly able to force those on the side of evil into hiding. That night the earth experienced true peace for the first time in centuries.

"The side of evil eventually fought back, of course, and one could argue that eventually the world fell into a daily battle of good versus evil. One day a year, though - this one - evil remembers the sting of that one battle, and lets good prevail."

I said nothing for a while and we walked on in silence. Finally I said, "That is probably the most epic story I've heard in a long time. It kind of makes sense, though. Is there a night where good backs down and lets evil run loose? Wait, wait. Lemme guess - Halloween, right?" Jack nodded. "Of course. Well, that kind of takes the fun out of dressing up."

We slowly continued on in silence, and snow started to gently fall. I hesitantly stepped a little closer to him and put my arm through his. He seemed taken aback, but didn't move to pull away.

"How are your parents doing?" He finally asked.

"Fine," I answered automatically, then remembering that I was talking to someone I could trust, I said, "Actually, no. They're not fine. They're like complete strangers now - to me, to Arvin, and even to each other. Mom is never not cold any more. We have the heat turned up enough that I practically have to wear summer clothes indoors, and she still has to wear a sweater and scarf at all times. She can hardly touch anything with wards carved onto it - which is most of the stuff in our house - without going into an anxiety attack. She tried helping me with dinner tonight, but the most she could do was open packages, work the microwave and stir the gravy. She can't touch the knives because they all have wooden handles with wards for accuracy and safety carved on them, and she almost couldn't even stir anything because we only have one spoon that doesn't have wards carved into the handle. Dad is acting like a lost puppy, which just breaks my heart because it's so *pathetic*. He keeps trying to touch my mother, but every time he does she just gets colder, and I don't know if it's because she just doesn't want to be touched or if it's because he's gotten so corrupt, and it's so difficult trying to take care of the house, I mean I'm only sixteen for goodness sake! It's like I'm taking care of a couple of children on top of worrying about Arvin, and, and, and—" I was starting to hyperventilate. I hadn't let anyone know about how stressed I was getting, and it wasn't until I started talking about it that I realized just how deep that stress was myself.

Jack stopped and wrapped his arms around me. I buried my face in his chest and held on to him as though it was going to somehow save me. I heaved deep, dry sobs, finally letting out all the stress and worry that had been building up. He stroked the back of my head and quietly said, "It's okay. You're a strong person. Going through all this just proves how strong you are. Everything is going to be just fine."

"How do you *know*, though?" I asked into his jacket.

He pulled himself away from me and reached into one of the inner pockets of his jacket. "One of the things I did while I was gone was stop by Alessandro, the Italian wardcarver. He is a descendent of the Templars, and much of his wards have to do with the purification or banishment of evil. I told him about your parents and he willingly gave me some of his more powerful wards. Here. I was going to give these to you when I took you back home, but I suppose that now is as good a time as any. They're symbols for clarity, which should help your parents find their way back to where they were before." He gently took my hand and pressed four small, flat stones into my hand. I examined each one - there were two distinct symbols, each carved onto two stones of their own. The symbols didn't resemble anything that I had ever seen before; they looked like fancy knots, though they lacked symmetry.

Jack saw my confusion, and tried to explain, "He carved a unique symbol for each of your parents, and carved two stones so you could have a backup for each of them. He said that they work most efficiently when the person they're carved for isn't aware that they're there, so it would be best if you placed them around your house in places your parents won't notice. Above doors, perhaps, or under their bed. Any place they pass by often."



I nodded. "Makes sense, I guess. But... these look so different. Nothing like what we have in our house."

He nodded. "Most wardcarvers establish their own style of wards. It is not uncommon for them to vary dramatically in how they carve their wards, especially if they're well established, like Alessandro."

"Huh. Interesting." I pocketed the wards and patted the outside of my coat to make sure they were secure. "This... well, it means a lot to me. Really. It's a fantastic Christmas present." I smiled and gave him a quick hug. He hugged me back, but let go as soon as I did.

"Actually..." he trailed off. It was hard to tell... was he blushing? He cleared his throat. "I actually got a Christmas present for you. I mean, different from those. One just for you. Um. Here, you'll probably need this," he said, fumbling through his pockets. He took out two long, thick leather gloves and handed one to me. He put his on, and I followed suit, confused. Once I had mine on he whistled a slow, low whistle, then steadily raised the note until it was almost beyond the range of human hearing. He was looking up, and I tried looking where he was. Nothing happened for almost a full minute, then suddenly a ball of fire burst into existence about forty feet above the cemetery. It glided down towards us, and I kept looking back and forth between it and Jack. He made no move, so I assumed that's what he was expecting, but I was still ready to make a run for it if we were actually in danger.

It slowed down and landed on Jack's outstretched, gloved arm. I panicked, ready to help put out the fire, when I noticed that it wasn't spreading. The fire calmed down and started to take shape.

It was a very large bird. It was still on fire, but only along the edges of its wings and the end of its long, curling tail. It had deep, black eyes that stood out against its bright orange and yellow feathers.

Jack smiled and looked at me. "Kenna, this is a phoenix. The phoenix that helped me escape from Germany, actually. It took me years to run into him - he doesn't often show himself to people. I'm actually surprised he came when I whistled for him. I wanted you to get a chance to meet him."

The phoenix looked at me intently, cocking its head from side to side, as though it were trying to figure out what it was seeing in me. It let out a whistle and looked at Jack, then back at me.

"Hey! I think he likes you! That's great! Hold out your hand." I cautiously held my gloved arm out in front of Jack's, and immediately the phoenix stepped from his arm to mine. I was surprised at how light he was, considering he was at least two feet tall from his talons to the top of his head. The tail feathers were another two feet long, making him an incredibly impressive-looking bird.

Immediately I felt a connection to this bird, and somewhere inside me I could feel Adena paying very close attention to him. I didn't feel a connection in a way that I would connect with a human, but not in the way that a kid connects with a puppy, either. Somewhere in between - I could tell from his eyes that he was incredibly intelligent, and that while he was no one's pet, he could recognize those he could trust. The phoenix started singing, and while somewhere in the back of my mind I was worried it was going to wake the neighborhood, I was mostly entranced by its song. I had never given thought as to whether animals had souls before - now I knew that at least one did. By the time it was done my eyes were wet, touched by the beauty of what it had sung.

"Wow," I breathed, and held my hand up to pet it. It met my hand and nuzzled its head in my palm. It drew back, so I dropped my hand, and it stretched a wing out and started preening. I glanced at Jack and did a double take - he looked nothing less than stunned. I turned my attention back to the phoenix, which had stopped preening and now had a long, bright feather in its deadly, curved beak. It stared at me, then started inching its way up my arm. I froze, not sure what to do. It stopped right before it reached the end of my glove, and started trying to extend its neck closer to me. I finally understood, and gently took the feather from its beak with my thumb and forefinger. It whistled, and without warning flapped its way off my arm and up into the sky.

I dropped my arm and watched as it flew higher and higher, then disappeared in a burst of fire. I grinned and looked back at Jack, who still had a stunned look on his face. "Wow! That was amazing! Now I feel terrible because I didn't get you anything for Christmas. Jack. Hellooo, Jack?" He still looked like someone had punched him in the gut.

He finally shook himself out of his shock and said, "I had no idea... well, I was definitely not expecting that."

"What do you mean? What were you expecting?"

"There are only a handful of phoenixes left in this world. They used to be companions to very powerful warlocks, but once humans started hunting them and their numbers started dwindling, they avoided humans more and more until they became a myth. I honestly wasn't even expecting him to let you hold him, never mind sing a song for you and give you one of his feathers. Do you even know what kind of feather that is?" I looked at it and shrugged. "That's a primary flight feather. They take a long time to grow back, so it is an immense show of trust that it gave that to you; that is a great treasure indeed. It has been long enough since phoenixes have chosen human companions that I'm not sure what the process for choosing is, but if I had to guess, I'd say he just chose you."

Now it was my turn to be stunned. "So... what does that mean, exactly?"

"I honestly don't know. But I'm willing to bet you'll be seeing him a lot more often. I now have to apologize again; I meant for this to be a thoughtful, unique experience, not one more burden for you to bear."

I gave him the warmest smile I could muster and said, "It was very thoughtful, and definitely unique. It's the best Christmas present I've ever received. Thank you, and again, I'm sorry I don't have anything for you."

"Are you happy?" I nodded. "Then you don't need to apologize. Seeing you happy is enough for me."

"That is so cheesy, you doofus," I teased, and wrapped my arms around his neck to hug him. He put his arms around my waist, and we held each other like that in peaceful silence. I slowly leaned back to break away, and as I did my cheek brushed against his. His cheek was mostly smooth and soft, though some stubble was poking through just along his jaw line. I could feel my heart suddenly beating faster as I had a flash of the moment that almost happened in the hospital.

He took a step back, though, and said, "It's getting late. You should probably go back home to get some sleep."

I nodded, still feeling my stomach doing flips. "You aren't going away again anytime soon, are you?"

"I don't have plans to, why?"

"I just want to see you again. Spend time with you, talk with you."

"I take no issue with that," he replied warmly. "You're tired right now and need sleep, but I will be by later on today. May I take you out for dinner and a stroll through a real park?"

"Of course! When will you be by?"

"Does five o'clock work for you?"

I was a little disappointed that I wouldn't be able to see him even earlier than that, but I nodded and said, "I'll be ready by then."

He gave me a boost over the fence, and I noticed that he didn't leave until I had reached my room and checked out the window to see if he was still there. I waved goodbye to him, and he left.

I didn't bother getting back in to my pajamas, and as soon as my shoes were off and I made sure my phoenix feather was protected by a small scrap of cloth I managed to find in my mothers' craft box, I collapsed on the covers and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.



I was woken up around noon by my dad, who was gently shaking my shoulder and saying my name over and over again, obviously worried about something.

"Is something wrong, dad?" I groggily asked.

"Are you okay? I was getting so worried!"

"Yeah, I'm fine... why wouldn't I be?"

"I just... well, you're normally up by now, and..." he trailed off, embarrassed.

I realized what he was getting at. I had gotten everyone in to a set routine, always getting up first and making sure the household was set up for the day. I was irritated that apparently it was becoming an expectation for me to take care of the family, but I tried not to show it. I stretched, yawned, and straightened out my clothes so they didn't look quite so much like I had slept in them.

"Have you and mom eaten?" I asked.

He nodded eagerly. "I made breakfast for us. Well, I tried to. The bacon was pretty crispy and the toast was really dry, but we've eaten."

I gave him a hug and said, "That's great, dad. I'm glad you made food for yourself this morning."

He nodded, pleased with himself, and left my room. I sat back on my bed, depressed. Getting mom and dad back in the kitchen was great; cooking together was the one thing that I always remembered them enjoying doing, but to see my dad so proud of himself for attempting (and apparently failing at) something that he should have been able to do in his sleep just reminded me how far my parents were from recovery.

I remembered the wards I had been given and pulled them out of my pocket. I turned them over in my hand and thought about where to put them. Over the doorway to their bedroom, definitely. The other set would go deep between the couch cushions, since my parents were still spending most of their time there. I peeked my head out my doorway to see if there was anyone upstairs. I didn't see or hear anything, but still tiptoed on my way to my parent's bedroom door. I quickly stashed two of the wards above the door, then nonchalantly made my way downstairs. Mom and dad were already stationed at the couch, so I put the other two wards above the main level bathroom door. I'd move them later tonight, after they had gone to bed.

I made lunch for myself and got a dinner together for my parents that they could easily heat up in the oven on their own, since I'd be gone that night. I showered and got ready for my dinner

with Jack, even though it was still hours away before he promised to pick me up, so I spent the afternoon studying the origami book Arvin had given me.

At one point Arvin started shouting unintelligibly, and I rushed downstairs to see what was going on. Thankfully nothing was wrong; quite the opposite, in fact. Ammon had sent not just one, but four post cards; one for mom and dad and one each for me, Arvin and Terra. Since the last word we had gotten from him was before Thanksgiving telling us he wouldn't be joining the family for the holiday and he'd be unable to reach us for quite some time, we were overjoyed to hear from him.

He didn't send us individual post cards often, but when he did it was usually because he had a lot to say and we ended up sharing our cards with each other anyway. According to the post cards, he had been traveling around south eastern Asia and been working on a piece on customs in various cultures that had been surviving for centuries. He was sad that he missed the holidays with us, but the families he was living with were really hospitable and did their best to make them feel like one of their own. My card in particular read:

*Makenna -*

*I got your letter. I'm glad you liked the magazine! I think it's going to be one of the central pieces to my portfolio. I met a really cool guru while traveling through India. He's probably a hundred years old and has taught me some cool things about the spiritual world. If he wasn't adamant about remaining anonymous, he'd be the main story in my next piece.*

*Keep dancing,*

*Ammon*

I was, to say the least, disappointed. He had nothing to say about any of the problems I had written to him about. The only things that even acknowledged that I had written him were the very first and last things he wrote. Well, it was a long shot that he'd understand my message anyway, so I took it up to my room and pinned it to the cork board above my desk. At least the post card looked cool, in a post-modern sort of way - it was a collage of some of the pictures that obviously didn't make the cut for his last piece, but nothing really fit together well. It just looked like bits and pieces of photos randomly arranged on the card.

I had a nagging feeling that I was missing something as I looked at it up on my wall, but before I could think about it too much I noticed that it was already four forty five and realized that I needed to do some last-minute touchups to my hair and makeup. I tried telling myself that I was being silly - Jack had seen me at my worst, so he probably wasn't going to notice if my eye shadow wasn't perfectly even, but I was still, for a reason I could not quite pin down, nervous about impressing him.

I anxiously sat on the stairs, ready to spring up the moment he knocked on the door. Dad passed by from the living room to get to the kitchen and paused to figure out why I was sitting on the stairs in a dress and my heavy coat and boots.

"Are you going out tonight?" he asked.

"Yeah, Jack's taking me to dinner. Oh, yeah! I made a casserole for you and mom and Arvin tonight. All you have to do is cook it at three fifty degrees for about forty minutes. I can get the oven preheated for you if you want," I said, getting up to go help out.

"Well, wait, hold on a second. Is this the same Jack that I'm thinking of?"

"I only know one..."

Dad frowned. "Is this a date?"

"I... well... no?"

"What happened to that nice boy? Dane?"

"He's gone. Gone, gone, remember? I'd have dumped him any way. Dad, Jack's just going to take me to dinner and then for a walk somewhere. It's just like hanging out with him, except he's going to pay for my dinner."

Dad sighed disapprovingly. "I don't want you going. I can't ground you - obviously that was a bad parenting strategy on my part. But I can warn you that getting romantically involved with him is most likely going to get you hurt in the end, and I can disapprove of this."

A knock on the door kept me from starting an argument with him. "Don't worry about me, dad. I can take care of myself. Thanks for watching out for me." I gave him a quick hug and opened the door. I managed to slip out before dad and Jack could interact, which I'm sure irked dad, but I didn't want to ruin this evening.

[\*Back to top\*](#)

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Jack was wearing slacks, a button-up shirt and a tie. He looked really nice, and I was pleased I had chosen to wear a dress. He was a perfect gentleman and opened the car door for me, even helping me in to the car.

"Is it okay if we go to the city to eat?" he asked when he started the car. "It's a bit of a drive, but there's a restaurant there where I feel it's worth the extra travel time."

"Of course. You could take me to a taco stand and I'd be happy," I replied with a smile.

He chuckled. "Well, it's a little higher class than that."

We drove off and I asked, "So where did you disappear to? We didn't really talk about it last night, but I am a little curious what could take you away for over a week."

"I felt... that perhaps I had been too forward with you. At the hospital. You were safe, and I felt it would have been best to leave you alone. I ran across Mina on my way from the hospital and started chasing her. I managed to capture her and get information from her. It took many days to get what little information I could, and unfortunately her clan found her and helped her escape. I thought I had her secure enough... my ego got in the way.

"She said she knew about the plot behind summoning the fire demon. She even hinted that she knows where Dane is now, and that the American I heard while I was in Germany also knows. I couldn't get much more information from her than that. I went back to Germany to investigate further. The castle where your mother and I had been detained was almost completely empty. The only creature that was there... well, I don't know what it was. It was like someone had formed a golem in the shape of a demonling, then imbued it with some sort of earthen power."

"Hold up a second. Was this golem thing disoriented to the point it didn't know up from down?"

"Not at first. It was very firm on why it was there - to guard the castle and alert its master - but once I started asking where it had come from, it fell into a downward spiral of confusion until it couldn't even pay attention long enough to answer any of my questions. Why?"

"I saw one of those things! It looked like a reptile cat thing, and it was made of clay but it was on fire, and it couldn't leave a certain area but it still caused a whole mess of trouble. I tried telling my dad, but he didn't really believe me because he'd never even heard of a thing like that before. You don't know what it is, either?"

"No, but I'm glad you saw one, too. I can start forming theories about it now. Where did you see this creature?"

"In the school parking lot. It couldn't leave, no matter which direction it went. It was really bizarre. What do you think it is? Are they related?"

He ignored my questions and just said, "Interesting. What else happened to you while I was gone?"

I told him more about the golem/demonling and about the fight with Mina (which I realized as I was telling the story was just an excuse to get a piece of my clothing with which to bloody up and taunt my mom).

"That's it, really. Well, when you were gone the first time. Just this last week I almost set the studio on fire. Oh, come on, don't look at me like that! It was an accident, and I didn't *actually* set it on fire! Wait. We have to go back a ways to establish what happened. Shortly after you left the first time, I found out that dancing helps maintain balance in my life – keeps the fiery side of my personality in check and whatnot. Apparently I can summon fire, too, though I didn't know that before the winter show. So anyway, this last Friday I snuck into the dance studio and danced on my own, since it had been a week since I had danced and I was getting anxious and also because if I didn't dance then I was going to be afraid of dancing for the rest of my life.

"When I dance, I go into this kind of trance... and apparently when I was in this trance I was on fire, like literally my feet and possibly the rest of me was on fire. I probably could have set the whole studio on fire if it weren't for Nobuko, who happened to walk in on me and started screaming and brought me out of the trance. And then I accidentally burned her but then I healed her and I had to tell her a lot of stuff but don't worry I didn't tell her about you." I had to take in a deep breath, realizing that I was talking almost as fast as I was thinking.

Jack was silent for a few moments, not reacting at all. I started to worry that I had said something to cause him to want to draw away. "Is it... related to the demon?" He finally asked.

"What? No, no. Well, kind of, but it's not his power, it's mine. Taking in that demon helped me remember - no, wait, not remember. Unlock? Maybe both. Well, anyway, it was this power that I've always had that I now know how to access. The healing part, anyway. I have no idea why my feet were on fire." I trusted Jack with my life, but I wasn't ready to tell even him about Adena. Not yet, anyway.

"Interesting," was all he said to that.

The rest of the trip was spent on lighthearted topics. He took me to a tiny little restaurant that called itself a "lounge" where the owner himself (who seemed to know Jack) greeted us and sat us in a booth that was partly curtained off from the rest of the restaurant. It was insanely cool, and the food was amazing.

We took our time eating and stayed there for a couple of hours. It was well past dark by the time we left, but I was starting to get used to the idea of being up late at night. He drove us to a park that was part way up a canyon. He led me down a path until we reached a waterfall.

The beauty of the scene took my breath away. The waterfall wasn't the tallest one I had ever seen, but it was almost completely frozen. The ice was solid white, and while I knew it took a long time for water to freeze like that, it still looked like it had flash frozen in place.

"Wow..." I breathed, and sat down on a boulder. Jack sat next to me, wrapping his arms around my shoulder to help keep me warm.

We sat blissfully like that for a bit, when suddenly he asked me, "Do you think you can try summoning fire?" The question took me off guard and I wasn't sure how to answer that. He saw

my confusion and explained, "You said that you were on fire when you were dancing. Do you think that you had summoned fire without realizing it?"

"I... well, I hadn't given it much thought. I suppose that's a good theory."

"Why don't you test it out?"

"What? How? Now?"

"Yes. We're alone, away from other people. Why not now?"

I gave it a minute's thought. "I suppose I could give it a shot. I honestly don't know what to do, exactly, but I'll try." I hopped off the boulder and stood a ways away from Jack. I held out my hands, palms up, closed my eyes and tried to summon fire. I hit a wall of sorts, and realized I had my necklace on. Whoops. I took it off and handed it to Jack.

I wasn't sure how to summon fire, exactly. The only time I had done it was by accident when I was dancing, and I couldn't remember how it felt, exactly.

Before I could give up I saw a glimpse of something bright in the darkest reaches of my mind. I remembered what Adena had said – that I'm a part of her and she's a part of me, and that everything she knows I know. She seemed to be able to control fire without having to think too much about it, and I tried accessing whatever knowledge she had on how to control fire. I was amazed at how easy it was when I found it – it wasn't like reading from a manual, but instead a feeling of warmth and brightness. I felt my hands growing warm, and smiled when I realized that I had actually done it. I was interrupted by a yelp.

I opened my eyes to see Jack trying to approach me. I looked at my hands - there were flames on them that were starting to die down, but I could also feel my hair settling on my head, and I realized that I had been completely on fire.

"Um. Sorry about that," I said sheepishly.

Jack opened his mouth a couple of times to try and say something. He finally settled on, "You were on fire."

"Well, yeah, I told you so, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but... you were *on fire*."

I rolled my eyes and went to go sit down again. Jack followed suit, but then froze in place and started looking around wildly. "What is it?" I asked.

"Something's here," he said quietly and grabbed my arm to pull me closer to him.

Suddenly a figure sprang out of the shrubs and swung wildly at us. Jack pulled me down onto the ground with him and rolled away from our attacker. We both got up and faced him.

He was disheveled, hunched over, panting, and altogether too pale, but I could have recognized the being no matter what state he was in. "Dane?" I said aloud.

He turned to face me and slowly tilted his head to the side until his ear was touching his shoulder. He grinned, eyes wide, and said, "Kenna... Kenna... my queen... my fire goddess... I can smell your power... oh, how sweet it is... the demon granted your wish for power, didn't it? Oh, I would be so jealous of you if I didn't have a greater power myself, now..."

I stepped away from him, not sure of what happened to him, but afraid of what I was seeing. "Dane, what happened? I thought you were dead..."

He howled with laughter, but started wheezing partway through, his voice unable to sustain the strain laughter took on it. It was in that moment I realized what had happened, and Jack pulling a stake out of his jacket pocket only confirmed it.

"You... you're a vampire?"

"Can you believe it? Would you ever have thought in a million years that vampires exist? I was turned after the demon killed me, and now I have more power than I ever would have

imagined! I can live forever, and now that I'm a vampire I can practice magic the way I've always wanted to!"

"But... you're dead. You are literally a walking, talking, rotting corpse. Look at yourself! Your burns from the fire demon haven't healed at all! You're going to spend the rest of your existence looking like something that belongs in the ground! *You actually do belong in the ground.*"

Jack put his hand on my shoulder and said, "He's not the person you knew when he was alive any more. I'm sorry. You... might want to turn away from this."

I saw him tighten his grip on the stake and I knew what he meant by it. I looked up at Dane and tried finding my ex boyfriend in his eyes somewhere, but all I could see were two flat black marbles, lusting for blood – my blood – staring back at me.

In the same moment Jack moved to attack Dane, the new vampire leapt into the air. Jack stopped and stood his ground, ready to strike at Dane when he landed, but Dane never landed. Jack and I looked around, wondering where he went, when we heard a chuckle from well above us. Dane was perched on the very top branch of a tree, grinning and baring his fangs at us. I glanced at Jack and was surprised to see a hint of fear on his face. Before either of us could say anything, the ground started shaking and we started stumbling around to try and keep our balance.

"What's going on?" I said aloud.

"I... I really don't know..." Jack replied. The shaking intensified and we both lost our balance, falling backwards. I tried getting up, but before I could take my hands off the ground ice formed over them, securing me to the ground. Ice soon covered my feet, too, and I was completely immobile. I looked to Jack for help, but he also had a prison of ice crawling up his limbs.

Dane jumped down from his treetop perch and chuckled. "I told you I had newfound power." He whistled and a couple of small figures emerged from the bushes, falling in step behind him. They looked very similar to the fire golem I had seen in the school parking lot, but with less defined shapes and much, much smaller. One was covered in leaves and twigs, while the other looked like it was leaking water.

"Do you like them? They're my minions. It took a lot of trial and error, but we finally perfected the art of harnessing demonlings' power. We build a nice little body for them covered in wards and witching symbols, and they will do anything I tell them to."

"You're the one that created that poor golem I found in the school parking lot?"

"Yes, well, that was a trial run. Got away from us and was short-lived, I'm afraid." Dane looked at me hungrily. "But we've got the process down, now, and the next one I get to create is for a blood demonling. I need blood for the construct, though, and not just any blood. I need human blood from someone who has a great capacity for magic, and you... you're just perfect for that." He drew a knife from inside his sleeve and grinned a maniacal grin.

Jack struggled against his icy restraints. "No! Not her! I'm a better candidate! I'm a half vampire! Human blood, with magical properties!"

Dane stopped for a moment and snarled at Jack. "Ha. Half vampire. How gullible do you think I am?"

"You didn't know that vampires existed before... so why not half vampires?"

Dane thought about it a moment, then nodded. "Well, I suppose I'd taste it in your blood if I had a sip. I'm hungry, anyway, so it's a win-win situation."



“No!” I screamed, and Dane looked harshly at me. Something in him had snapped, and his demeanor changed from a quiet, spacey crazy to a mad insanity.

“Whore!” He screamed. “It doesn’t matter what your boyfriend claims to be, I should have thought of killing him first and making you watch! I tried so hard to ignore that your heart wasn’t completely mine, tried so hard to tell myself that this bastard meant nothing to you, that I was better than him in every way, but the moment he came back from his little ‘vacation’ I could tell he was the one that had claimed your heart. Well, now you get to watch as I take his heart right out of his chest.” He leapt over to Jack, knifepoint held right above his chest, and said, “Any last words?”

“Just one question. Who helped you build those constructs?”

At this question I could see the look in Dane’s face turn from anger to pure adulation. “Oh, he is wonderful. He knows about everything – magic, charms, vampires, demons. He told me that it’s our time to stop living in the shadows, out of sight from humans. We are so much more powerful than those weak, pathetic humans, so we should be the ones ruling the world! He has quite a following, you know, and is passing on his talents to all his stu—”

He was cut off mid sentence by a stake embedding itself in his chest with great force, knocking him back. He started to disintegrate, and as he was falling apart, so did the constructs. I heard footsteps coming from behind us, and tried turning as far as I could to get a good look at who had saved us.

Mina slid out of the shadows and commented, “It’s always a shame when I have to kill one of my children on their very first hunt. Especially one as talented as him – did you know he’s the first vampire ever to be able to control witching symbols after being turned? Pity. Still, no use having him around if he’s going to be a blabbermouth. Glad he trapped you for me, though, Jackie-poo,” She cooed.

He struggled against the ice bonds, which had failed to melt when the water construct disappeared. I watched in horror as she crouched over him and bore her fangs. “We can finally put our little struggle to an end. I’ve *so* looked forward to the day I can drink your blood... every... last... drop of it.” In a motion too quick for me to see, she tore his collar down and plunged her fangs into his neck.

He struggled against the ice, but it was too thick. Soon his struggling started to become weaker, and I could see his eyelids start to droop.

I struggled against my own icy shackles, calling out Jack’s name, but the ice was also too thick around my hands and feet to do anything about it.

Just as I was starting to lose hope, a familiar voice spoke to me.

God, you’re so dumb. What melts ice faster than anything else, Kenna? Seriously, what were you showing Jack you could do literally five minutes ago?

I felt my hands and feet growing warm, and I concentrated on making them grow hotter and hotter. Within seconds the ice around my arms and legs exploded in shards away from me. Some of the shards embedded themselves in Mina’s back, which surprised her enough to stop drinking Jack’s blood and see what was going on.

“You stay away from him,” I said, anger fueling the fire surrounding my fists and causing the flames to spread up my arms and across my body. I roared and sprinted at her, fist cocked and ready to throw a punch when I reached her. She dodged out of the way, but midstep after missing her I turned around and tried punching her anyway. My knuckles didn’t land, but that didn’t matter – a ball of fire jumped from my fist and made direct contact with her face. Her hair caught on fire, and she dropped to the ground in attempt to put it out in the snow. It didn’t

matter, though – not only was she on fire, but it was *my* fire. I narrowed my eyes, and with every one of her screams I imagined the fire growing bigger and hotter until soon there was only a pile of ash on the ground. The fire still raged on long after she no longer looked like anything – she wasn't good enough to exist even as ash. I wanted to burn it until nothing was left, and in order to do that I needed to make the fire hotter. It grew hotter and hotter, and even though I myself was on fire I was starting to sweat from its white hot glow.

I was losing myself to the flames, and I couldn't help myself – it felt so good to be in so much power. I could make the ground melt, if I wanted to, and turn the whole park into a pit of molten stone. The flames jumped higher as I took pleasure in the thought of the extent of what I could potentially do.

Somewhere in the distance I heard a voice calling my name. It was scared, and I was annoyed by the fear. There was nothing to be afraid of! Fire could purge the world of evil and unite everything. It was so warm and bright in this world of cold and darkness.

The voice kept saying my name, though, was pleading with me to stop. I kept going, though, until some of his words – words I wasn't even sure I heard clearly – came through.

*“I love you. Please stop.”*

It was Jack's voice. Jack! I immediately killed the fire as I remembered that Mina had seriously hurt him. I looked down at him and saw that he was red and sweating, and I realized what I had done. I fell on my knees next to him and started to try to help him up, but withdrew my hands when I realized that I could potentially just hurt him more.

The heat from the fire melted the ice that was keeping him bound to the ground – in fact, it had melted all ice and snow within a thirty foot radius of where I had been standing - but he was still lying there, panting.

“Jack... I'm so sorry... are you okay? We need to get you to a hospital.”

He propped himself up on his elbows and shook his head. “No. I'm fine. A bit weak, but I don't think I lost that much blood. What about you? What was that?”

I looked down at my palms and quietly said, “I... I don't know. I lost control. I got so angry at Mina for trying to kill you, and I wanted her dead so badly... I nearly set you on fire, didn't I?”

He shook his head. “No. Your fire got really hot, but I'm fine.” He tried reaching out to take my hand in his, but I drew it away.

“Don't touch me. I don't want to hurt you.”

He paused, then took my hand anyway. “Why do you think you're going to hurt me?”

“Because... because something happened there that scares me. I had control of the fire, but I liked burning Mina so much that I just wanted to keep going. If you didn't stop me I would have kept going and burnt the trees, melted the rocks... I would have destroyed everything. What sort of monster revels in such destruction? What am I? Is this the demon I now have inside me?”

Jack gently squeezed my hand, and adjusted his position so he could put his other arm around me. “You're still you, but it seems you're more powerful than you thought. Do you feel the desire to burn down the park right now?”

“Not really... but when I think about it all I can think of is how much fun it would be to set something on fire again. See! I'm *awful*.”

“No, you're not. It's just going to take a little bit of training to control yourself once you summon fire like that. I mean that – you are absolutely amazing, and you've gotten so much stronger in the time I've known you, and you were a strong person to begin with. I'm going to

be by your side, I promise, and I'll help you through this, no matter what. I mean that." He tilted my chin up so I would look at him, and as I looked into his eyes and saw his sincerity I felt relief wash over me. I didn't completely believe him, but it was comforting that he still trusted me. I smiled, and he said, "See? You'll be all right."

I stood up, offering a hand to help Jack up as well. He wobbled a bit, but was able to walk on his own. He went over to Dane's remains and the piles of clay that used to be the demonlings' bodies. All that was left of Dane were his clothes and a few bones, and none of the clay that had been left behind showed any sign that they had been anything but piles of clay.

We got in the car and drove back to Steven's Ridge in silence. It wasn't until we got off the freeway exit that Jack spoke up. "Are you okay, Kenna?"

I shook myself out of my thoughts and replied, "Huh? Oh, yeah, I'm fine. I'm not the one who was nearly eaten tonight."

"Well, yeah, but what I meant by that was... well, you've seen someone you knew personally – someone you dated - get killed twice now. Are you really okay with that?"

I watched the street lamps whiz by as I thought about my answer. It was true, seeing Dane alive – well, moving and talking, anyway – did cause me to catch my breath. But was it out of fear or surprise? I went over the course of our relationship in my mind and realized why I wasn't missing him as much as I should have.

"You know, it's true that I was happy around him while we were going out, and I thought that I deeply cared about him, but I think I only superficially cared about him. He was fun to be around, but... well, something he said near the end made me realize that that was all my relationship with him was – fun. Not the permanent, everlasting sort of relationship you hear about in fairy tales. If I'm going to fall in love, it's going to be with my best friend. Someone who knows everything about me, that I don't have to pretend to be someone I'm not when I'm around them. He didn't fit any of those criteria. So really, I don't feel any sort of loss because I didn't really have something with him to begin with." I looked at Jack, but it was too dark to see what his reaction was. Snow started gently falling, and we fell back into silence.

We pulled up to my house and he went around the car to open my door for me. We walked up to my door without saying a word, and once we got there we stood for another silent moment. Remembering something, he reached into his pocket and pulled my necklace out of it. "You'll probably want this back, won't you," he muttered.

I took it from him and looked at it as it sat in my palm. I realized I was way too dangerous without it at least near me, and I started to put it back on around my neck. He stopped me, though, as if he were reading my mind, and said, "I meant what I said. You're not dangerous at all. With a bit of practice, you'll be just fine." He gave me an encouraging smile, and I smiled back. "Anyway, I'm sorry that tonight ended so poorly."

I shrugged. "I'm in pretty deep into this world of shadows, aren't I? Nights like this are pretty much becoming the norm."

He nodded. "I'd prefer them not to be, but I'm afraid you're probably right."

"Anyway, thanks for dinner. I had fun, vampire attacks aside." I gave him a quick hug and turned to open the door. Jack also turned around and started walking down the pathway back to his car.

Just as I finished unlocking the door and had my hand on the door handle, I realized something that made some of the feelings I'd been having make sense now. I felt my heart growing lighter and butterflies in my stomach, and knew I had to act before I chickened out and

let Jack leave. I ran down the walkway to catch up with him. He turned around when he heard me coming up behind him and gave me a quizzical look. “Did you leave something in the car?”

“No, you doofus. Actually, sorry about that, *I’m* the doofus. Being with you makes me so happy in ways that I’ve never felt before, and in the car I was telling you about the kind of person I want to fall in love with, and that person is *you*, isn’t it? *You’re* my best friend, and *you* know everything about me, and I feel most myself when I’m around *you*!” I grinned at him, feeling the burden of having my feelings sorted out and making them known be lifted from me. When he didn’t say anything immediately, I threw my arms around his neck and pulled myself close to him. He hesitated for a moment, then put his hands on my waist. I leaned back just enough so that I could look at his face, and he closed the gap between our lips.

He was so sweet, so tender... and after only a moment he gently but firmly pushed me away.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, confused at why we were no longer holding each other.

He rubbed his face and looked flustered. “I’m sorry... this is a bad idea. I shouldn’t have let you do that. I shouldn’t have been so forward with you. It’s just that... when I’m around you I forget who I am, which isn’t good.”

“I don’t understand,” I replied when he took a moment to draw a breath. “If I make you happy, and if you make me happy... and back at the park, I thought I heard you say...” I trailed off, unable to continue when I saw how sad it made him.

He leaned against the car. “I’m a half vampire. Because of that I have many enemies, and you being close to me – especially like that – would only put you in danger. I don’t age at the same rate you do, and because I spend so much time putting myself in danger, I could die tomorrow, or I could live for hundreds of years after you’ve died. Either way, one of us would experience a pain too deep to bear.”

“Listen, because of who my parents are, and now because of who I am, I’m in a lot of danger anyway. And I can deal with you aging at a different rate...”

“Could you? Think of any story you’ve read or seen in the movies about an immortal falling in love with a mortal. They have to keep moving so they don’t arouse suspicion when the immortal doesn’t age, and after a certain point the mortal has to claim to be the immortal’s parent, then grandparent, and their relationship has to be a secret. You may think you can deal with that, but it would become increasingly difficult to do so over time.” He waited for me to reply, but I couldn’t. If I said anything I wouldn’t be able to keep the tears at bay. He stepped back towards me and held me close, which only made it worse.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “But I want you to have the chance to fall in love with someone that you can live a fulfilling life with. I’d still like to be your best friend, though, and continue to have the close friendship we’ve built up.”

“I’m always going to want more, though,” I finally choked out.

“I know, and I’m sorry. If it’s going to be too difficult to bear, I can leave Colorado and you can forget about me. Mina was the reason I came to Colorado in the first place, and now that she’s gone...”

“No!” I exclaimed. “I’d rather have you here as my friend than not here at all.”

He nodded and let go of me, stepping back again. “I am glad you feel that way. I do not want to lose your friendship, either. The offer stands, though – if it becomes too much to bear, I will leave. Do you understand? Will you promise that you’ll ask me to leave if my staying will only cause you pain?”

It took a long time for me to agree, but I finally nodded my head.

“Good. It’s been a long and tiring night, so I’ll leave you to get some rest. Good night, Kenna.”

“Good night, Jack. Will we be able to keep spending time together? Maybe sometime again soon?”

“Of course. I promised I’d help you out with your powers, right? Better to start sooner than wait for the last possible moment to practice. I’ll see you later.” He got in his car, started it, and left.

I watched as he drove off down the street, then turned the corner and out of sight. I got to the house and jumped in surprise when I opened the front door to see a figure sitting on the stairs there in the dark.

“That looked really, really rough. Are you okay?” My older brother asked.

[Back to top](#)

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

I stood with my mouth open as Ammon waved at me. “Hey. Thought I’d stop by for a bit since I missed both Thanksgiving and Christmas. Kind of funny that I almost beat my postcards here, actually. Seriously, though – I’ve had some serious relationship problems before, and none of them felt as bad as that looked like it did. Are you going to be okay?”

I felt a tear fall down my cheek, which finally triggered the rest of the tears I’d been holding back. I sat on the stairs next to my brother and leaned in to him when he put a comforting arm around me. I silently cried for several minutes, and he was kind enough to not say anything until I was ready to talk.

“I love him, and he loves me, but we just can’t be together, and even though I completely understand why it doesn’t make it hurt any less.”

“I know. It’s one of the downsides of living in *our* world.”

I snapped almost completely out of my misery when he said that, with the emphasis on *our*. Did he know?

“Let’s go to your room and talk a bit, shall we?” He said as he stood up. He offered a hand to help me up, and followed me as we tiptoed to my room. He closed the door behind him, and grabbed a couple of small objects from his backpack, which he put on top of the doorframe. He then pulled my desk chair out from its spot, and turned it to face me as I sat on the edge of my bed.

“I got your message,” he said simply, and waited for me to respond.

“Um, yeah. Obviously, since you sent that postcard. Cool about the guru. Sounds like you learned a lot.”

He rolled his eyes, stood up, unpinned said postcard from the cork board, and started drawing on the front with the closest writing tool he could find, which was one of my felt-tipped pens.

“What are you doing? You’re going to ruin your collage!” I said, and started to get up to stop him. Before I could stand up all the way, though, he turned around to face me again and handed the postcard over.

“*I got your message,*” he repeated, and I looked at what he had drawn. I gasped when I saw that he had outlined and connected the edges of different objects of each picture to form complex, yet vaguely familiar symbols.

“You wrote these wards?” I asked. “You know about mom and dad?”

He nodded. “And about my name, and your name, and Arvin and Terra’s names, and what that means for us, and what it meant for mom and dad to be apart.”

“How long have you known?”

“Not long, actually. I learned by accident, really, and only right before you sent your note. If I hadn’t kept and reread your letter I would have completely missed that you’ve connected with your ‘inner fire’ and that mom and dad were in trouble.

“While passing through India I met another wardcarver – the guru I told you about. He recognized the wards on the keychain mom and dad gave to me which I had attached to my backpack. He invited me to stay with him, of course, and started going on and on about how he was retired but was still so happy to see the work of other wardcarvers and asked how my parents were doing and if I was developing the talent. He’s one of those guys that can see auras or something like that and talked about how he was honored to have a powerful spirit of wind in his house, and of course by then I was so confused but I stuck around anyway because I thought it would make a good piece for a magazine.

“So I stayed with him and acted like I knew what he was talking about. One day he gave me a demonstration of what his wards could do, presumably to compare the effects of his wards versus our parents’ wards, and I realized that what this guy was doing was real. So I studied mom and dad’s wards, and tried it out for my own. At first it was disastrous, since I was just trying to copy what mom and dad had already done, but then the guru taught me how to follow my own instincts and draw my own style of wards. They’re still heavily influenced by mom and dad’s work, I’m afraid, but they do work most of the time, so that’s something. The wards I put above your door are to make the room soundproof, which I realized is what mom and dad did when we were young. It totally makes sense, now, all the times we tried to listen in on their late night conversations and couldn’t. Remember that?

“Then I got curious about his ability to see auras, figuring that if he was right about the wards he was probably also on to something with that, as well. I asked him about it, and he told me all these things about myself that he read in my aura that were just too private and too accurate for him to be making stuff up. He also pointed to the metal piece on my keychain and said that, even though he drew his wards for wind slightly differently, he recognized it as a symbol for wind and could feel the connection I had with it. I asked him to teach me how to feel these bonds, and how I could strengthen my bond with the wind, and he very generously obliged.

“From there figuring out the rest was just process of elimination. I remembered that you and Terra and Arvin also had accessories similar to mine, and when I looked at the other beads on my keychain I realized that three of them look like a tree, waves, and a fire, and I thought, if my personality is like wind, than my siblings must also have personality traits like earth, water, and fire. You are fire, right?” He asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. Mom and dad explained to me that the wards on my necklace were to keep my fiery personality from getting out of hand. I found out that dancing helped naturally balance my personality out–”

“Like traveling does for me?” Ammon finished. I nodded, and he continued, “Yeah, that’s one of the things that the guru told me when he first talked about what he saw in my aura. Anyway, I got your letter shortly after that and realized that you may have been aware of this stuff, too. They were really subtle hints, by the way – I almost didn’t catch them. I would have come home the second I got the letter, but I was really into the training I was getting, and didn’t want to leave quite yet. It wasn’t until the guru told me the repercussions of mom and dad being

apart for too long that I realized that you were telling me you needed help, so I left as soon as possible – hence why I got here only shortly after my postcards.

“Hah. Sorry, that was really long-winded. Get it? I can talk and talk and talk without noticing because of my windy personality. It’s funny, I never would have realized it if it hadn’t been pointed out to me. Sorry, I’m getting away again. So, obviously you’ve known for at least a little bit longer. When did you find out?”

“Not too long after we moved here.” I just nodded my head once and left it at that.

When I failed to elaborate, Ammon asked, “How’d you find out? Or was it just something that you realized on your own?”

I sighed and looked at the clock. It was about half past midnight, and while I wasn’t tired since I had slept in so late, I wondered how Ammon was doing. “It’s a long – a *very* long – story. You gonna be able to stay awake?”

“You really think I’d fall asleep while talking about something like this?”

“Good point. It started when I saw Jack – that’s the guy you saw me with – slay a couple of vampires in the cemetery out back.”

“Whoa, whoa. Hold on a second. Vampires?”

“Yeah. You... didn’t know they exist?”

Ammon just stared at me like I had grown a second head. I rubbed my eyes, seeing that I had my work cut out for me.

“I can’t believe that the guru... he didn’t tell you why wardcarvers exist? What the wards are for?”

“Just that they’re good for encouraging certain behaviors in people or influencing environments. Did you really say *vampires*?”

“Yes,” I said again, getting annoyed. “Listen, there’s a lot of things that exist. In fact... you know what, lemme just show you. Maybe we’ll get lucky and someone will come out early tonight.” I got up, turned off my bedroom light so we could see out my window better, and motioned for Ammon to stand next to me at the window. He tried asking me what we were looking at, but all I said was, “Just look out into the graveyard. Normally no one shows up before one o’clock, but there have been a lot of parties lately.”

He gave me another look, but didn’t say anything else. Sure enough, ten minutes later a couple of ghosts appeared with a long folding table and started setting it up. Ammon looked between them and me several times before exclaiming, “Holy shit! There are ghosts in that graveyard!”

“Yeah, and that’s just the beginning. Listen, there’s a lot of things in this world you’d think only exist in fairy tales, but are, in fact, very real. I myself have only scratched the surface, I’m sure, and I’ve already met a werewolf, an elf, a shape shifter, goblin, naga, wizards and witches, demonlings and a full-fledged demon.”

“So when you said that your story is really long, you didn’t just mean about ten or fifteen minutes, did you?”

I shook my head. “No. You still wanna hear it?” Ammon didn’t say anything in response, just sat back down in the desk chair and looked at me attentively. I sat back down on the edge of my bed and started my story.

“Like I said, it all started when I saw Jack slay a couple of vampires in the backyard. Now you have to understand, real vampires aren’t like the vampires we read about in modern fiction. They’re more like zombies...”



It was after four in the morning when I finally stopped telling my story, which took much longer than needed since I was frequently interrupted by Ammon's questions. I told him about my first encounter with a vampire, about Mina and Dane and the demon, about how there seemed to be some sort of mastermind behind everything but how frustratingly little information I had on him. I even told my brother about my relationship with Jack (barring the most private moments between me and him), since Ammon had caught a glimpse of my exchange with the half vampire outside the house. The only thing I didn't tell him about was Adena, even though it was likely that Ammon was the only person in the whole world that would even come close to understanding what was going on with what it would be like to have an inner alter ego. I just felt that I needed to keep her to myself for at least a little while longer – I didn't want to tell anyone about her until I knew who she was for myself. I also didn't tell him about what happened earlier that night, with my being able to summon fire on my own and how I felt when I started doing so. I was still afraid of what had happened, and didn't want Ammon to be afraid of me on top of everything else.

When he finished asking questions I said, "I can't believe that your guru didn't tell you about this whole other world of ours. Mom and dad told me that we were constantly moving because they were being hunted all the time by creatures of evil that wanted them dead. If you're starting to carve wards now, too, it's only a matter of time before you start drawing attention to yourself. Heck, I don't even carve wards and I'm constantly in danger just because I'm the daughter of wardcarvers and I can manipulate fire."

"Well... he did mention that I needed to be careful with who I told about myself and what I can do, but he didn't say anything beyond that. He's so isolated that I think he's not really in much danger to begin with. I'm gonna have a hard time finding him again, myself."

"You're going back?"

"Yeah, I have to. He told me that if I don't learn patience and how to keep my wards pure, I could lose my talent or become corrupt."

"But... mom and dad didn't get training, and they were just fine!"

"They relied on each other to keep themselves in check. I don't have a companion to do that for me, so I need a teacher."

"So... how long are you going to stay?"

"Not long. I have plans to leave by the end of next week. Sorry, I know it's not that long, but it'll be long enough to fix what dad's done do the house and do whatever miscellaneous jobs need to be wrapped up."

"Oh. You sure you can't stay any longer?"

"Yeah. Even if I didn't have to go back, now that I've had a taste of traveling, I can't give it up. I'd get really cranky really quick, and become more of a burden than a help. So what besides fixing the damage dad's done to the house needs to be taken care of?"

"I don't know. Bills, I suppose. I took mom's bank card and she hasn't even noticed, so I doubt that they've really paid much attention to random expenses that've been coming in. I don't even know how much money they have in the bank, or when they'll be going back to work." I felt anxiety rising in my chest as I realized that I'd probably have to get a job, and even then I'd be unable to cover all the expenses of a house like the one we were living in. I didn't even know how many bills there were that were coming in. Electricity, I knew, and water, too. What else was there? I had no idea.



“Okay. Well, maybe I can help you convince mom and dad to go back to work, at least for their normal jobs. I know that their jobs are closely related to wardcarving, but I’m sure we can find a way to keep them from getting too close to the workshop for a while. And I’ll show you how to pay the bills, too – it’s not really that hard. I’m sure that mom and dad have a lot in savings, since wardcarvers can get paid a lot for their skills. A man came to my guru offering fifty thousand dollars for just one rune to keep him safe in his travels. He didn’t take it, since he only carves runes for those with a pure aura, and even if the man had good intentions, my guru wouldn’t have taken any money. The point is, I’m sure mom and dad are secretly loaded, if they had any business sense at all. Now, I need at least a little bit of a nap before everyone else gets up.”

I helped Ammon get set up in Terra’s old room. We hadn’t set it up as a guest bedroom yet, but at least there was enough room for my brother to set up his inflatable mattress, which was all he really cared about. I remembered to move the runes from the top of the bathroom door to under the couch cushions, then collapsed into bed myself.



The next week went by far too quickly. Mom and dad were really happy to see Ammon, and almost seemed like they were getting better for a day, though the following morning they went back into their funk. I had to go back to school, and during the day Ammon tried to get our parents to get ready for work. He finally got mom to go on the last day he stayed with us, though she ended up only working for half a day. Dad was afraid of touching carving tools without mom there, even just to build furniture, and ended up just staring at the ceiling while mom was gone.

Ammon showed me how to pay the bills, and we found out that mom and dad had enough savings to pay the bills for almost a full year, and they had other bank accounts, though we couldn’t get access to those. It was a relief that I didn’t have to get a job quite yet, but I was still worried – what if my parents didn’t get better? What if they got better, but relapsed later? My brother told me not to worry about it, tried assuring me that our parents were going to get better, but I had my doubts. Things just didn’t feel the same around the house any more.

We decided that it was best that no one else know about Ammon’s wardcarving abilities, so we waited until after everyone else had gone to bed to start fixing the bad wards dad had carved into our house. Since outright replacing the banisters and cabinets would be obvious, Ammon worked really hard on making just enough changes to the existing wards so they became neutralized. He was tempted to try and change them into something good, but he wasn’t sure enough of his capabilities to actually go for it. It took several hours each night he was there of sanding on my part and carving on his part to get it done, and even then we rushed through the last night he was there to make sure we got everything.

Those hours during the night while I was helping Ammon were the happiest of my week. Nobuko was drawing further and further away from me, obviously weirded out by my powers, and while I tried to stay friendly with Jack, it was really difficult at times to not feel sad for the relationship I wanted but couldn’t have. Ammon had always been my favorite sibling, and we got along together really well, making the last few hours of my day something to look forward to.

The night Ammon left I found myself staring at the ceiling, unable to go to sleep. Ammon showing up helped a little, and he assured me that he would be stopping by more often than he

used to, but in the end the only thing that really changed was that dad's bad words were just squiggly lines on the hardware.

At least you have someone else to talk to, now, that understands what you're going through, I heard Adena say.

I guess, I replied after a while, though I still don't think he understands how scary my ability to summon and control fire is. His connection to wind isn't nearly as strong.

True, but you could have helped him with that.

How? The only reason my abilities are so strong are because of you, aren't they? What was I supposed to do, ask him if he had another consciousness living inside his brain helping him out?

That was an option, yes.

Right. And if he doesn't, he'd think I have schizophrenia. I still don't know why you're even there.

I wish I had the answer to that, too, though I think I'm a little closer to figuring it out. That night at the park, where we nearly set the whole thing on fire... I felt like I was remembering something from a long time ago. From before we were born, maybe. It was weird, and I couldn't quite grasp it, but it just made me think that maybe I existed, at least in some capacity, before you did.

I thought you were a part of me?

I am, she said hastily, and I wouldn't exist without you. But I think I have a greater background than just springing into existence when we were born.

I wish I could help you remember. But if it means setting something on fire again, I'm not going to do it. I don't want to ask someone I could potentially hurt to be there to bring me back in case I get out of control.

Ah. I suppose I should owe you an apology for that. I was... encouraging you to keep the fire going, hoping that it would help me remember better. You would have been able to control it just fine, if it weren't for me. I promise I won't interfere unless you ask for my help from this point forward. Does that sound okay?

I wanted to be mad at her, but for some reason I just couldn't find it in me to start yelling. Yeah, I said, that sounds good. I'm still not sure I'm going to do much with fire in the near future, though. Jack said he was going to help me, and I'm just finding it too hard to be around him.

Why?

Because I love him, and he doesn't want me to, even though he loves me back. How am I supposed to deal with that? Every time I look at him I think of how we could be, instead of what we are.

And what are you guys?

Friends. Nothing more, nothing less.

Not true. He's your best friend, and that hasn't changed. You've already answered the problem you've been facing, and for some reason you just don't want to apply it.

Oh? And what's that?

You said you wanted to spend the rest of your life with someone who's your best friend, right?

Your point?

Just stay his best friend. The only difference between what you have and what you want is, what, kissing? You're too young to get married, to move in with him, do to any variety of things that people in love do.

So your point is, what? I'm a kid so my love for him isn't the same as it would be if I were older? That my love for him and feelings for him as a friend are the same?

No. My point is, you can still love him, and there's nothing wrong with that. You've loved him for a long time. The only difference now is that you've put a word to the feeling, and it's causing you to stress out because you've never before been in a situation where you've truly loved someone.

What, were you a relationship expert before we were born?

No. I'm just vocalizing what you already know. Come on. You have no reason to resent him for rejecting you, because he *hasn't actually rejected you*. He said he still wants to be best friends, right? The only thing that's missing is all the fun extra stuff, which he may come around on later. Just have patience.

I didn't want to admit that she was right, but, well, she was definitely right. It didn't make me feel a whole lot better, but maybe spending time with Jack would start to feel normal again.

So since you seem to have this amazing insight into my life, I remarked, what do you think about this evil madman that seems to be after me?

No idea, but you know what?

What?

I'm gonna be with you when we do find him. And I'm looking forward to paying him back for everything he's done to you, me, your parents, and all your friends. Sound good?

Yeah, sounds good.

We may have talked a little while longer, but if we did I couldn't say what it was about. All I remember is falling asleep feeling more peaceful than I had in a long time. I was still afraid of myself, and I was still unsure about how I was going to feel about Jack the next time I saw him, and I was a little frightened that I had no idea who was after me and my family and what his grand scheme was, but I trusted Adena, and for that... I could be at peace, at least for the moment.

[Back to top](#)

## EPILOGUE

In the months that passed for the rest of the school year, remarkably little changed. Mom continued to work at the university, but only as a librarian, and dad did custom orders for normal furniture from home. Neither of them carved anything new, and whenever they weren't working, they spent their time on the couch not doing anything. I continued to take care of them, and at a certain point couldn't help but wonder if I was just enabling them to coast along, and maybe what they needed was a chance to pull themselves out of their funk. Anytime I tried backing away from helping them out, though, I watched them fall into panic attacks and confusion, and couldn't help but jump back in to help them out again.

Nobuko and I grew apart, slowly but surely. I was worried that she'd tell my secret to the first person who would befriend her, but nothing ever happened to me after we grew apart, so at least she remained friendly in that sense. Even though I started going to the dance club again, I didn't really make friends at school after I lost her friendship. I wasn't entirely sure what to attribute to that -maybe it was because I knew that just being around me was a danger to people

that couldn't handle themselves. Maybe it was that I was spending all my daylight hours cleaning the house, cooking for my family, and paying bills.

All these things I did during the day – school, home, dance club - became my fake life, my mask. It was in the shadows that my real life began. I made friends with a ghost, a fourteen year old girl named Sandra, and while I couldn't see her except late at night and at the cemetery, I discovered that it didn't matter how long ago she had been a teen herself, a good girl friend was indispensable. I also met a little pixie girl named Doola, who was a barrel of fun but a handful of trouble. Pixies don't really keep track of ages, since their kingdom lies on a different plane of existence that we live on, but she behaved like a teenager and liked escaping to the human realm often. At about three feet tall she could pass as a little kid, but she mostly spent her time sneaking around doing whatever she felt like. She reminded me a lot of some of my friends back in San Francisco, and she showed me how to have the kind of fun where I could just forget everything that was going on for a few hours.

And of course there was Jack. Adena was right – I could accept my feelings for him and still be best friends. He started taking off more and more frequently and for longer of stretches of time, often to places that he refused to tell me about (“For your safety,” he always said), so I came to cherish every moment I had with him. As promised, he helped me master my control over summoning and controlling fire, which became quite useful for slaying vampires. Oh, he definitely didn't want me to go with him on the occasional patrol, but I reminded him that I had, after all, saved him from Mina. He finally agreed to let me come after I wore him down, and after setting three vampires on fire at once, killing one and enabling Jack to kill the others, he admitted that he would appreciate my help every once in a while. He still didn't like the idea of me putting myself in danger, but he knew better than to try and stop me doing something I'd set my mind to.

After school ended he left for a particularly long mission, and didn't come back for a month or so. When he came back he seemed particularly troubled – enough that he let himself get distracted and almost killed on that night's patrol.

“What's going on?” I asked once we found a good place to rest for a moment.

“I heard rumor that one of Mina's clan – the female vampire that attacked you at the Eldraif's Blessing party – showed up out east. She had the anti-ward on her still. I'm not sure if she used it at all, but... what disturbs me the most is that she wandered so far away from the clan area.”

“Is it uncommon for vampires to wander very far? I thought Mina went all the way to Europe when you were... well. While you were captured.”

“It's true. She was a clan master, though, and had her own area on which she had claim. Clan masters can move, but younger vampires find themselves restricted to the regions their masters have control over, even after their master has died. I cannot figure out why she would have strayed so far away... why she would have kept the anti-ward... and...”

“And... what? What else happened?” I asked, worried at his hesitation.

“She was slain. I cannot get any clear information on how she was struck down, though. The most information that I've gotten is that she was burned through divine intervention.”

“She was struck by a god?!”

“I doubt it, though I can't rule it out. I simply cannot figure out what it means, to be burned through divine intervention. No heavenly creature has crossed over to the human plane for centuries - millennia, even - and maintained their celestial status. I had heard rumors of an angel wandering around the country, but disregarded them as only that – rumors. To hear of something

that may have happened because of an angel, though, is unusual. I'm sorry, I know I just got back, but I have to leave again and find out what happened."

"Can I go with you?" The words slipped out without thinking. I had, on occasion, thought about going with Jack on one of his adventures, but had always been too afraid of raising suspicion when I missed too much school, and too worried about what would happen to my parents if I was away for too long.

The question also took Jack by surprise. "I don't know how long I'll be gone, or if it'll even be worth the time. It may be incredibly dangerous, it may be terribly dull. I have never been sure of what could happen whenever I check out a rumor."

"That's fine. It's the summer, so it's not like I'm going to miss anything super important, I don't think. The house is in good order, and Arvin's getting the hang of taking care of himself."

"What about your parents? How are they doing?"

I was silent for a few moments. "You know, I've been taking care of them as though they're children for so long that I don't really know how they're doing. I want to go with you partly because of my purely selfish desire to get away from here for a while, but I also can't help but wonder if maybe my parents need me to leave, too. Maybe it's time for them to relearn to take care of themselves."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Yes. No. Maybe. No. I'm just trying to rationalize going with you. I'm a terrible person, aren't I?"

Jack smiled and gave me a half hug. "If it were anyone else saying that, perhaps. But you do have a point – I think your parents will benefit greatly for learning to rely on you less. If it'll make you feel better, I'll have a couple of ghosts check in on them every once in a while."

"So... you mean I can go with you?"

"Yes, but I was planning on leaving by the morning. Can you be ready by then?"

"Absolutely! I'll head home right now and get some stuff together really quick and can be ready in less than an hour."

Jack dropped me off at my house, where I threw together a backpack of some of the bare essentials I'd need while traveling, on a whim threw in Ammon's warded postcard and the phoenix feather, and wrote a couple of notes telling my parents that I'd be on a camping trip for a while and telling Arvin what he could do to help out if things got a little out of hand.

Before dawn broke I met up with Jack at the sundial in the cemetery. He took me by the hand and said, "So tell me, have you ever visited Boston before? It's quite an exciting place."

[Back to top](#)

## **Here's a sneak peek into Living in the Shadows, book 2:**

Lillie let out a frustrated sigh as she failed for the fourth time in a row to grab her history book from her locker. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath in and out, and concentrated on her hand. *Stay solid for once*, she begged, and tried again to grab her history book. *Fifth time's a charm*, she thought bitterly as she tucked her book inside her bag. She slung the bag over her shoulder and trudged out to the bus stop.

She managed to get on the bus without tripping, which happened less often than she'd like to admit, and got off on the last stop. Walking the eight blocks to the apartment building, she snuck around the back and through the construction, and made her way up the stairs to the apartment she had claimed as her own. She dropped her bag next to the door, made her way back to the bedroom, and was about to let herself float down to the air mattress set up on the floor when suddenly she got that chilly feeling in her core that she got when she passed through something solid.

Before her sprawled on the floor laid a tall, dark blonde-haired man. She drop kicked him – successfully, she added to herself with satisfaction – and he let out a small “oof.”

“Get out of my house,” Lillie snarled as the mysterious young man slowly got on his hands and knees.

He finally stood up all the way, smoothed out the front of his shirt (which was silk, Lillie noted – how tacky), and blinked in disbelief a couple of times as he looked at her.

“Huh. You’re actually pretty cute. Wasn’t expecting that. You’re certainly preferable to the hobo I was expecting,” he said, Lillie noting his British accent. Without warning, the young man launched at Lillie, this time with a hiss. *Are those... fangs?* Lillie wondered, as again she let him pass harmlessly through her body. He hit his head with a loud crack on the wall behind her, and as he cradled his head she noted with displeasure that he had left a big dent in the wall, plaster flaking down onto the floor.

The young man got up again with a little hop, trying a little too hard not to appear fazed by what had just happened and turned to face Lillie. “You aren’t a meat creature, are you?” He asked casually.

Lillie just shrugged. “You done attacking me?”

“Yeah. I’ll get out of your hair now. See ya.” The young man slid his hands into his pockets, jerked his head in a goodbye as he walked out the bedroom door, and let himself out of the apartment.

*What swag*, Lillie thought sarcastically as she took off her shoes, belt and cardigan and finally let herself float down to the air mattress. She never quite made contact, instead hovering a few inches above the blankets. *No point in pretending to be human tonight*, she thought. *Not when there’s some psycho trying to eat me.* She let herself drift to sleep without another thought of the incident.

Lillie grabbed her cell phone and checked the time when she woke up. One o’clock a.m., just like every other day. Apparently normal humans only needed a maximum of eight hours of sleep every night, but Lillie managed to clock in a solid ten every day. As she started to rise to her feet she froze. The blonde-haired man from earlier was leaning against the window sill, and though it was pitch black she could see him with absolute clarity. He had a smug smirk on his face, his arms crossed. Lillie wanted to punch that expression off his face, then maybe knee him in a particularly sensitive spot for good measure.

“In case you didn’t get the message earlier, I don’t appreciate trespassers. Please leave.” Lillie said as she straightened.

“I don’t think I will. You’re way too interesting for that.” The mysterious person in front of her stated.

Lillie thought this over. “You’re really not going to leave?” He shook his head. She sighed and said, “I’m hungry. You can have whatever mac and cheese I don’t eat.”

“My, my! What hospitality!” The man said as he followed Lillie to the kitchen.

“Do you need the light on?” Lillie asked as she got a pot out of the cupboard.

“No, I’m good,” blondie replied as he wandered around the living room area, looking out the windows. He made his way back to the kitchen and leaned against the fridge. “So I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind for the past few hours,” he said.

“Charming,” Lillie muttered under her breath.

“I am, aren’t I?” He replied. “And while I can’t get that pretty face out of my mind, mostly I’ve been puzzling over what you could possibly be. You smell so deliciously human, yet you so obviously aren’t. ‘What could she be?’ I asked myself. Ghost was my first thought, but I’ve never known a ghost to be tied to an apartment like this, nor one that wears real clothes and uses an air mattress to hover over. You also completely debunked that theory when you started making food. My next thought was that with your white, wispy hair you must be a white lady, but no white lady wanders alone – there’s usually another one or two in the immediate vicinity. I scoured the entire building, and not only is there no one on this floor or the next one down, but once you do hit occupied units you get nothing but humans. Well, one shape shifter as well, but I’m sure you knew that.” Lillie didn’t, but tried not to show her surprise. “So that leaves me with one last viable option. You’re a poltergeist! And I must say, you are the sweetest-smelling, cutest poltergeist I’ve ever seen!”

“I need to grab the milk. It’s from a powdered mix, I hope you don’t mind.” Lillie said, tapping her foot impatiently.

“All tastes the same when it’s mixed in to the pasta, babe,” the increasingly irritating guest said as he slid away from the fridge.

Lillie was silent as she mixed the powdered cheese and milk in to the pasta, then spooned well over half of it in to a bowl. She put the spoon back into the pot and handed it to her guest. “I only have one bowl,” Lillie explained as she grabbed a fork for herself and a couple of cups. She poured the cups halfway full with some of the milk and placed one on the counter next to the stranger.

They ate in silence for several long, uncomfortable minutes. The young man was done in a few seconds, though Lillie didn’t see him take more than a couple of bites. She decided to take her time and was only a third of the way done before she decided to say anything.

“So what’s a vampire doing trying to prey on squatters in a near-failed apartment project?” She asked.

“I suppose for the same reasons a poltergeist would settle in to said apartment.”

“I never said I was a poltergeist.”

“I never said I was a vampire.”

Lillie nearly slammed her bowl on to the counter and started grinding her teeth in frustration, though otherwise she refrained from showing any emotion. “Remember that time when you tried to eat me? You know, way back when at three o’clock in the afternoon yesterday? You did a pretty shitty job of hiding your fangs. And while I know you don’t think that window would cast a reflection without any light, I have excellent night vision. You definitely did not have a reflection. You made a point of telling me I smell like a human, which tells me that you have a very refined sense of smell, which is common in vampires. Do I need to keep going?”

He held his hands up and said, “All right, all right, you’ve got me. Clearly we’ve started off on the wrong foot. Let me introduce myself – I am Kyrin, vampire misfit. And who may my incredibly generous hostess be?”

Lillie picked her bowl of pasta back up. “Name’s Lillie. I suppose misfit would be a good word to describe me, too, though probably not in the anarchist-type way you’re thinking of.”

“Misfit what, may I ask?”

“Human.”

“Oh, come now. I thought we were going to start over! Starting off with a lie is a terrible way to make an acquaintance.”

Lillie shrugged. “You don’t have to believe me. I wouldn’t believe me, either. Heck, I don’t really want to believe it much at all myself, but I’ve been assured that I really am human. Now, I have errands to run. I’d appreciate it if you left so I can get on with my morning.”

Kyrin pouted comically. “That’s it? You don’t have any questions for me, nor are you going to let me ask any questions about you?”

“That’s correct. Deal with it.”

“Huh. Pity. Two incredibly interesting beings such as us simply beg to be explored.” He wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

“Out. Now.”

“Fine! Fine. I can tell when I’m unwanted.” Kyrin let himself out, but before letting the door close all the way behind him he poked his head back in the apartment and said, “Well, I’d be a terrible guest if I didn’t offer you over for dinner in return for the hospitality you’ve shown me. May I treat you to hot dogs sometime in the near future?”

“I cannot stress enough how much I want you to leave.”

“I’ll take that as a maybe. See ya!”

Before Lillie could say another word he shut the door. She rolled her eyes and started cleaning up the dishes from breakfast.

Lillie went back to her room and fished through her bag for a fresh change of clothes. She got her toiletries out of the cupboards, showered, brushed her hair, and put her clothes on. Her wardrobe didn’t vary much - when her family told her to set out on her own, they told her to study what the average woman was wearing and buy clothes to reflect that. Look good, but don’t stand out, she was told. She ended up getting two pairs of jeans - one skinny, one boot cut - and some dress pants that she ended up never wearing. She owned a few plain tees and tank tops as well as some cardigans, and besides a couple of belts to wear around her waist over the cardigans (which she never understood - why do jeans have belt loops if that’s not where it’s fashionable to wear them?) that was the extent of her wardrobe.

She carefully wiped the bathtub and sink dry and pushed the air mattress into the closet - who knows how much noise Kyrin had made while he was wandering around on this level. Normally security checks rarely made it to the top, unoccupied level of the apartment building, and when they did they rarely checked beyond the kitchen and living room - but still, always better to be safe than sorry. She just hoped that the dent in her wall wouldn’t cause too much of a problem, if it was noticed.

Before leaving Lillie double checked the lock. She had no idea how Kyrin could possibly have gotten the door unlocked, which only made her more aggravated at him. She didn’t have a key, naturally, but since she could materialize herself through solid objects it wasn’t an issue.

She carefully made her way down the six flights of stairs. Not that she ever made any noise, but there were still some younger people living in the apartments that stayed up all hours of the night, and Lillie never knew when they were going to leave or come back, creating the risk of her being spotted. Thankfully all was still, and she made her way through the back of the building, climbing over the construction zone in the process.

The cemetery was a full sixteen blocks away, but Lillie had no problem walking that distance. It was almost four in the morning by the time she reached the cemetery and pulled



herself over the fence. Picking her way through the headstones, she made her way to the large marble angel watching over a family plot. *It's unusually quiet tonight*, she thought to herself as she leaned against a nearby monolith, waiting for her friend to arrive.

Five o'clock hit and Lillie started to get worried. While Hector had, on occasion, arrived later than she had to their normal meeting place, it was normally on days where she was either particularly early or had skipped sleeping at her place and gone straight to the graveyard to spend the night.

Finally she made the decision to do something that was considered incredibly rude - she grabbed a glass vial from one of the outside pockets of her backpack that held dozens of tiny, pure white, dried flower petals. She tapped no more than four or five on top of the headstone that read *Hector Lewis* and waited patiently. Lillie counted the minutes, getting more and more distressed as the third, then the fourth minute passed by. At five minutes at twenty-seven seconds Hector finally appeared.

"Really? *Really?! Virgin's tears?* What on earth would compel you to go so far as to summon me with *virgin's tears?! It didn't occur to you that maybe I had something important on my plate for once?*" The ghost of Hector Lewis stepped out of the statue of the angel. Even though he had died around the age of thirty, he was one of Lillie's best friends while she was growing up. Usually nothing but kind and soft-spoken, his harsh words stung.

"Sorry. I got worried. We haven't missed a night ever since I left..." Lillie trailed off.

Hector softened a little when he saw her embarrassment. "I see. I apologize. It's been a stressful night for ghosts everywhere for the last week."

"Why? What happened?"

"Well... it was just a rumor at first... but yesterday we heard from somewhere else the same thing... apparently an angel has been spotted."

Lillie could feel her heart beat faster, though she couldn't decide if it was out of dread or out of hope. "An angel? But... they've been gone for thousands of years! Are you sure it wasn't a fallen angel?" Fallen angels were not common, but it never surprised anyone if one revealed itself to be as such.

"Pretty sure, though until I see it for myself I can't give a solid answer. Apparently it was fully decked out - wings, halo, the whole shebang. I'm sure you can imagine how we ghosts are reacting to this."

Lillie could clearly imagine the uproar the ghost community was in. Ghosts were the souls of people who were either too scared to move on or of people who adamantly didn't believe in an afterlife. It didn't take long for these souls to realize that hanging around on earth was the least desirable of all options, and almost all ghosts had regrets of not moving on. No ghost would ever go on the record of saying so, but many whispered about how angels had the ability to provide another chance to move on. It was why there weren't any ghosts older than a couple thousand years old - that was the last time any angel had visited earth.

So for an angel to be spotted was a huge deal - perhaps, if it could be found, it could help so many souls move on. *It could very well help my parents, too*, Lillie added to herself.

As though he could read her mind, Hector said, "I've been trying to confirm the rumor for myself, which is why I failed to show up today. I was hoping you'd understand, seeing as how I'd love nothing more than to be able to ask about your mother and father."

Lillie almost cracked a rare smile at that. "Of course. Hector, you're the most selfless soul I know." Hector truly was a humanitarian. He didn't talk much about his life, but apparently he was hugely invested in charity work. Naturally he had a one-way ticket to heaven when he died,

but he declined - not out of fear or disbelief, but he caught a glimpse of all the souls that had made the mistake of staying on earth and decided to help them instead. He insisted that there was no better way to show love to God than to show love to his fellow ghosts, which made him one of about a dozen ghosts on the whole face of the planet that preferred earth to heaven.

Lillie checked her watch. "Thanks so much, Hector. I'd love to hang around, but the store is opening in a couple hours and I need to grab some stuff before employees get too alert."

"I understand. I'll keep you updated, and I promise I'll remember to come by tomorrow."

Lillie waved goodbye and headed out of the graveyard. She made her way to the nearest big box retailer that wasn't open 24/7. There were more and more of these stores opting to be closed at night - the economy made it difficult enough to keep the store fully staffed during the day, so keeping it open at night was becoming more and more counterintuitive.

She focused on making herself invisible as she approached the parking lot. She'd slipped up a couple of times before, getting caught for a few seconds on the cameras, but since she didn't really exist on paper it was too difficult for the police to find her. Besides, the worst that could happen was that she'd be charged with trespassing, since she was super careful not to be visible while she was taking items off the shelf.

Going in a couple of hours before the store opened was the perfect time of day to steal what she needed, Lillie had discovered. There were usually one or two assistant managers there, as well as some bakers and clothing specialists and other employees that needed to get their jobs done early on in the day, but beyond that there were very few people who would be wandering the aisles. There usually weren't even security guards there until the store actually opened.

She took only what she needed for the next week, and only high-volume items that could be written off as having been damaged, lost or miscounted during the shipping process. Apples and oranges, a couple of cucumbers, Mac and cheese, a variety of yogurt, store-brand bread and cereal, tortillas, some canned beans and other vegetables, and a block of cheese. She had little variety in her diet, but it was enough to get her by. She also grabbed some travel size shampoo, conditioner, and soap, since she was constantly running out of the tiny portions.

She glanced at her watch - it was nearing seven o'clock. The bus to get her to school came by at seven thirty. If she ran she might have enough time to get back to the apartment on her way to the bus stop.

She couldn't focus much on her classes that day, mind mostly on the idea of finding that angel. Hector hadn't mentioned where it was rumored to have been seen. Was it close by? Was it all the way on the other coast? Was it traveling? If she were an angel, she'd choose to live in Massachusetts. Not only was it a smaller state, but it was one of the more densely populated states in the entire US. After all, that's why she had chosen to stay there. Well, that, plus the strong connection it has to the afterlife.

She wondered if it could disguise itself. Fallen angels did, she knew that. But if it could disguise itself, why would it let itself be seen in its celestial form? And if it was in disguise, what was its mission? Legend was that the last time angels visited earth, it was to banish darkness. Being raised the way she was, Lillie didn't exactly have an objective opinion on whether or not the world was being thrown into darkness again, but then again she wasn't exactly keen on paying attention to what happened on earth.

She gave up on going to class and instead wandered around campus. It was early spring and starting to warm up to a temperature she wasn't comfortable with. She dreaded the upcoming summer, unsure whether or not she'd be able to stand the temperatures or if she'd end up migrating north once the semester ended.

People stared at her as she walked toward the library, which she was getting used to. It was hard to miss her - she had white hair and extremely pale skin, and at 5'10" she was taller than most other girls on campus. She was also incredibly skinny, which of all things made her the most self-conscious, but she was starting to put on a little weight with her diet of mostly boxed and canned foods.

She made it to the library with no interruptions and made the long journey to the furthest possible wing and went down the stairs to the mythology section. She had already read through all of the books that even touched on communicating with the dead, and all the books written on the lifestyles and habits of ghosts were horribly misguided. So the only thing to do from there was, well, read every single book on the paranormal and mythological. Lillie had already made her way through all the authors whose last names started with "A", and she was only a book away from finishing the "B"s.

The book she had picked up was simply called "Myth's Origins", by Phillip Bowen. It had a section about ghosts that Lillie had already read through, but it wasn't like it was going to hurt reading through the rest of it. It was formatted like an encyclopedia, and ironically enough the first entry was on Angels. The opening paragraph read:

*Angels are one of the few creatures throughout history that have separate origins in several, unrelated cultures' histories, leading some scholars to believe that they may, in fact, exist in some capacity. Physically they are usually described as radiant, ethereal, wearing anything from the most elaborate robes to nothing at all. The most well-known images give angels feathered wings and halos. Their function is most often that as a messenger or guide, though there are several myths that give angels a militant or a guardian role.*

From there the entry separated into different cultures and how angels were portrayed in each one. It was informative, but Lillie knew that she had to take it all with a grain of salt, seeing as how the first thing that the book had to say about ghosts was that they were the souls of people who had "unfinished business" or "regrets" and said nothing about how it was possible that the souls simply didn't want to move on, which she knew first hand was not the case. She sighed, realizing that she wasn't really any closer to knowing anything about angels than she was when she opened the book. Not only did it not mention the myth that angels could help "restless" souls move on, but the only thing mentioned that she hadn't heard before was that angels could choose to become mortal for no apparent reason at all. Not even fallen angels became mortal. Who would want to be a mortal, roaming this mess of a planet as a fragile being?

The thought disgusted her enough that she cut her research short and put the book back, deciding to give doing genealogical research another chance. Of course, just like when she first started researching her parents, it was too difficult to find anything beyond birthdates and maybe a wedding photo of the average, un-extraordinary couple before the year 1920. She had sifted through almost all the microfilm the university had dating the thirty years before 1925, and there was still nothing to give her a lead as to what her parents had been doing before they disappeared off the face of the planet.

It was almost two by the time she gave up, which was just enough time for her to get to the bus stop and get home.

Even though she had been going through a bit of stress over the last 24 hours, she wasn't as tired as she normally was by the time three o'clock rolled around. She didn't have anything to do but read from the textbooks for her classes, so she dragged her air mattress out to the bare living room, opened the blinds to create a greater sense of openness, lay on her stomach, and started reading.

A couple of hours passed by when suddenly there was a knock on her door.

"Shit", she swore under her breath as she lost her concentration and let the book she was holding pass through her fingers and make a huge *thud* as it hit the ground. She quickly picked it back up and concentrated on making herself, the mattress, and the book invisible. She just *knew* that Kyrin had made too much noise, and now management was probably making checks on all the empty apartments to make sure no squatters had settled in to any of the units.

Another knock on the door. Lillie stood up and started making her way to the bedroom to grab her bag. She was disappointed that she was going to have to move - it was the perfect place for her to stay, so she had actually started settling in to it. Damn that vampire for his noise.

"Hey! It's me! I know you're there! I wanted to give you something!" the person on the other side of the door said. Oh no. She knew that voice. She dropped the things she was holding and floated over to the door. She stuck her head out, still invisible, and found Kyrin standing there, holding a couple of plastic grocery bags.

"What do you want?" She asked, being careful to still keep herself unseen.

"I'm being a good neighbor and brought housewarming gifts over! He said cheerfully, looking at the area her voice had come from.

"I don't want anything."

"Doesn't matter. Human tradition says that you need to accept the casserole and beer I got for you."

*See what happens in January 2013*

[Back to top](#)

#####

About the Author:

August lives with her husband and his goldfish along the Rocky Mountains in central Utah. When she's not writing, she spends her time making and decorating a variety of baked goods or spending time at the local game store, which she affectionately calls the nerd hole.

Connect with the Author online!

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/AugustWestman>

Facebook: <https://facebook.com/august.westman>

Smashwords: <https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/augustwestman>