

Spring 5-22-2020

## The Spinners' Tales

Sierra N. Offutt  
*University of New Orleans*, [soffutt@uno.edu](mailto:soffutt@uno.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

---

### Recommended Citation

Offutt, Sierra N., "The Spinners' Tales" (2020). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 2792.  
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/2792>

This Thesis-Restricted is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis-Restricted in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis-Restricted has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

The Spinners' Tales

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Fiction

by

Sierra Offutt

B.A. Widener University, 2016

May, 2020

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my project director, Joanna Leake, whose brilliant insight and guidance helped bring this project from the seed of an idea to a fully realized collection, and who supported me through every phase of its creation. I would also like to express my appreciation for all those faculty and students of the UNO Creative Writing Workshop who provided valuable input on the earliest drafts of these stories and helped me to sort the wheat from the chaff. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Nancy and Harry, without whose love and support none of this would have been possible.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	iv
Death Blow .....	1
Storm Warning.....	18
The Greatest Form of Freedom.....	32
Here to Stay.....	46
Living with the Dead .....	57
Safe .....	76
Like Feeling .....	93
Vita.....	103

## **ABSTRACT**

“The Spinners’ Tales” is a loosely connected story collection exploring the lives of a variety of supernaturally gifted characters, referred to within their own community as Spinners.

**Keywords:** Fiction; Short stories; Urban fantasy; New Orleans

## DEATH BLOW

Anton was one mistake away from falling apart. He'd been tending bar for three and a half hours straight without even a pause for a drink of water, and he was regretting telling his manager that he was ready to get back to working Saturday nights.

He grabbed the next ticket from the spooled back-up on the printer. He lined up a row of shot glasses on a tray so the server could just take it when she swung by and neatly poured tequila across the row. He tossed the salt and limes on the tray and set it on the pick-up counter with the ticket. Then he was on to the next with barely a breath in between.

Adrenaline spiked high in his chest, a sharp thrum that kept him moving through sheer momentum. He felt like he was stumbling downhill, just managing to keep his feet under him, but the inevitable misstep and fall were moments away.

He'd only been out of physical therapy for a week, but he'd been determined to go straight back to work when the doctor cleared him. Nearly dying had given him a new perspective on things. He'd spent nearly thirty years living in the moment, doing what he wanted for no reason other than that he wanted to. Now that he realized it could have all been ripped out from under him without warning, he wanted to do something more meaningful with his life.

He cleared six more tickets and turned to the customers jostling for standing space at the bar. He strained to hear their orders over the band covering classic rock tunes onstage. Four beers, one Hurricane, two shots of Jack, another beer. As soon as one customer stepped away, another shoved forward. His fellow bartender, Jaime, didn't even seem to be sweating in her tight black T-shirt. She looked almost bored as she slung drinks at a pace that would have seemed normal to Anton three months ago. Now it felt impossible to keep up.

At the far end of the bar, a college-aged girl with dark hair leaned over the sticky surface and waved for his attention. He held up a hand in acknowledgement. “Be with you in a minute, sweetheart!” he called down to her, though he doubted she could hear him over the din. He finished pouring a vodka soda and two more draft beers before he made it to her. A burly guy with a lumberjack beard and flannel to match shoved forward and she jumped out of his way.

“Just a minute, man,” Anton said to him. He directed his attention to the girl. “What can I get for you, babe?”

“Oh, thank God,” she said. “I was starting to think I was invisible.”

Anton’s mouth went dry. It was a metaphor, he reassured himself. People said they felt invisible all the time.

“Dude, what the fuck?” the guy with the beard said loudly. “I’m trying to get a drink here.”

“Yeah, you and everyone else. Wait your turn,” Anton said.

“I’ve been waiting, dickweed. I want a fucking beer.”

Anton ground his teeth to avoid saying something worse than he already had. He hated caving under pressure. Usually he’d snap back with an equally sharp reply, but he didn’t want to make waves when he was still getting back into the swing of things. He just wanted this asshole out of his face.

“Fine. What kind?”

Jaime sidled up next to him and flashed a smile at the guy. “I’ve got this, A.” She leaned forward on the bar, giving the guy a view of her cleavage and thoroughly distracting him from his outrage. “Come down this way and I’ll hook you up,” she said, tilting her head toward the other end of the bar.

Jaime never went home with the clientele, but she was a pro at working them for tips. The tight shirt, her vivid red lipstick, and the flash of a stud in her tongue when she spoke were ripe with implied promise. Anton would know. He'd flirted in her direction when she started back in the spring, and she'd shut him down like she did everyone.

Anton flushed with annoyance as the guy followed after Jaime. He knew she was trying to help, but before the accident, she wouldn't have bothered. She would have known he didn't need it.

"What a jerk," said the college girl, still waiting her turn.

"Sorry about that," Anton said. "What can I get for you?"

"I need someone to help me," she said. Her previous patience gave way to a slight edge of desperation. "I can't find my brother. He was supposed to wait for me outside the bathroom, but when I came out, he was gone. Will you help me find him?"

"Why don't you try asking one of the security guys?" Anton suggested. He craned his neck to see over the bar and saw Ryan, the former college wrestler who manned the security post by the stage. He flagged him down.

"I don't think..." the girl started.

Ryan gave Anton a half-nod of acknowledgement as he reached the bar. "What's up, man?"

"This girl says she lost track of her brother. Can you help her out?"

Bewilderment twisted Ryan's face. "What girl?"

Dread wrapped a gnarly fist around Anton's gut. The girl was small, but she was standing right in front of them. There was no way Ryan shouldn't know who he was talking about.

It was happening again.



“She’s right – She was just right here.”

“Must have found him herself.” Ryan shrugged. “If she comes back, let me know.”

Anton nodded and resolutely turned away from the girl. If no one else could see her, he would have to pretend that he couldn’t either.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “What the hell is happening to me?”

Not to her, Anton thought, but to him. He hadn’t been right since the accident. He’d been reckless, taken a turn too sharp on his bike after a rainstorm, slid out and cracked his head on the asphalt. He was dead on the table for two minutes and sixteen seconds.

He had woken up in the hospital after a four-day coma, his face and the left side of his body a mess of road rash. The doctors gave him a thorough tongue-lashing for the stupidity of racing on oil-slick roads and told him repeatedly how lucky he’d been. With a fractured cheekbone, reduced vision, and a series of bright blue stitches along his scalp as proof of where they’d cut open his skull to relieve the pressure on his brain, he’d felt less than fortunate.

He’d still been in recovery in the ICU when a little girl in a hospital gown had tottered in, crying, and asked where her mommy was. He had no idea how to talk to kids, but he’d told her everything was going to be okay and that they would find her mom. He pressed the call button, but when the nurse came, her face went carefully blank as he tried to explain about the girl. She came back with his neurologist. The doctor asked a series of questions that made it clear that neither of them could see the little girl, who was sitting in plain view on the edge of Anton’s bed, playing with the fraying hem of the blanket.

Over the next few days, there were others: a Hispanic man with a tattooed face and a set of handcuffs still dangling from one wrist who swore he was hiding from the police; an old woman who made polite conversation about her husband, who was recovering from open-heart

surgery down the hall. At least one of the doctors who'd come in to check on him periodically hadn't been real, either.

Anton focused his attention on the spool of tickets that had printed out while he was attending the customers at the bar. He grabbed glasses for a couple of draft beers and turned back to the taps. He stopped short of running into the girl, who was standing right behind him. The glasses slipped from his hands and shattered on the floor.

Her eyes went wide, and she skittered back from the broken glass. "Shit, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to —"

"Just leave me the hell alone!" Anton said. "You shouldn't be back here. You shouldn't be here at all." You *aren't* here, he meant, but how was he supposed to explain to a hallucination that it wasn't real? Wasn't that basically the same as talking to himself?

"Dude, what is your problem? Get a grip!" Jaime snapped from behind him.

He swung around, frustration sparking higher, and stopped at the look of alarm on Jaime's face. She had her hands raised defensively, like she was afraid of him.

He took a deep breath. "Sorry. Sorry. I —" But there was no sane way to explain what was happening; he didn't understand it himself.

"Take a break, A," she said, quiet but insistent. He could barely hear her over the bass and drums competing for decibel level on the stage. "You're freaking me out."

"No, I'm —" But he couldn't say *fine*, not with the not-there girl standing right next to Jaime with that fixed look of desperation. "Yeah. Right. Okay. I'll be out back."

He hurried out from behind the bar and headed for the door to the kitchens that led to the tiny courtyard between the bar and the club next door. He ducked and wove around patrons. The girl dogged his steps.

He reached for the door, and she reached for him. “Wait. *Please.*” Her hand passed through his arm as if it wasn’t even there.

Her eyes widened. “What the —”

Across the bar, someone screamed. While all of the attention in the room tracked toward the terrorized voice coming from the bathrooms, Anton turned and fled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Technically speaking, Liz was off duty.

She should have been resting at home, maybe luxuriating in a bubble bath with a glass of wine, but instead, she was staking out Bourbon Street in the hopes of finding the dealer whose cocaine was killing tourists and college kids.

She leaned back against a stretch of brick wall between two bars and tried to blend in. She had her gun and her badge concealed beneath her leather jacket, and with one foot propped against the wall, she thought she looked like she belonged. She was too tall to pull off unobtrusive, but she’d lived in the city her whole life. It may have been a few years since she’d done any partying in this part of town, but she knew how to play the part.

The bass from one of the bars rumbled through her chest, and she took a drag from her cigarette. She kept her eyes half-lidded as she blew out a long stream of smoke. She didn’t have to watch closely to scan the people on the street for what she was looking for. Liz was an Empath – a walking emotional radar.

The *giddy-horny-frustrated-drunk-high* buzz of the late-night bar-goers washed over her as the nicotine hit her bloodstream. Even a few years ago, the atmosphere would have swept her up in its rush, the emotions she absorbed from others tangling inextricably with her own. It

would be easy to let it happen even now, but she couldn't afford that tonight. Tonight, she was on a mission.

It wasn't that Liz needed to be the one to catch this guy. It wasn't even that she really thought she had a chance of catching him like this. She wasn't a detective; she hadn't learned to think like the criminals the way she'd seen some of the others on the force do. It was just that she couldn't stomach the thought of sitting at home and doing nothing while the ache of the victims' families' grief still throbbed in her chest.

Liz and her partner, Bantam, had been sent to make the notification to the second victim's family. That had been before the brass realized they had a larger problem on their hands than just a bad batch of blow. Taylor Jacobsen was a Tulane student celebrating her twenty-first birthday with a handful of friends who had talked her into trying something new. Two of them had ended up in the hospital. Taylor ended up in the morgue.

Bantam had wanted Liz to do it. He said she was "better at the touchy-feely stuff," but his *bitterness-fear-resentment* told her it was because she was a woman, and he thought talking to the dead girl's parents was beneath him. She'd given him a hard look to call him on his bullshit, but she'd still left him in the patrol car and gone to knock on the Jacobsens' door. She wouldn't argue just to subject the girl's parents to Bantam's prickly awkwardness in the face of an unwanted task.

She'd never done a notification before, but she thought she knew what to expect. She hadn't been prepared for the wave of sudden despair that rolled out from Taylor's mother. It battered and pulled at Liz like the undertow of an ocean until she could barely breathe, and she'd had no way to block the force of it. She could shield herself from emotions that were familiar; she had to do it often in her line of work. But anger, frustration, and fear were easier to separate

from herself. Grief was all-consuming and lingered, and she'd had little firsthand experience of it. Even now, three days later, the ache kept hold of her, as if she'd been the one to lose a daughter.

A raucous group laughing and shouting in German passed Liz as her radio crackled to life on her hip, *amusement-exhilaration-annoyance* rolling off of them. She missed the first part of the dispatcher's message, but caught the address – “6-3-7 Bourbon Street.” Just half a block from where she was standing. She ground the remaining half of her cigarette beneath the heel of her boot and wandered down to check it out.

Just before she reached the address in question, Liz passed a brick corridor between buildings, too narrow to be a proper courtyard, though there were a few benches against the walls. She barely glanced down it, then staggered under the force of the *anger-terror-confusion* radiating from the man in the alleyway.

“I can't help you, okay? Just leave me alone. Leave me the *fuck* alone.”

Liz stepped into the corridor to see who he was talking to, but there was no one. He was alone, a young man with a shag of dark hair and a concert T-shirt talking into thin air.

She'd encountered her fair share of the mentally ill and homeless on the job, but this man didn't feel like that; he was too clean and too focused, nothing like the chaos of someone suffering a breakdown. Still, she proceeded with caution. Her off-duty weapon was holstered beneath her jacket at the small of her back, and she kept one hand near it as she slowly approached the terrified man.

\* \* \* \* \*

Coming outside had been a mistake. The stale, skunky smell of marijuana mixed with the beer-and-vomit smell that ran the length of Bourbon, a nauseating combination in Anton's

adrenaline-fueled state. Two more non-people had joined the girl when he'd left the bar, and they had him cornered against the wall. He knew they weren't there, that he could just walk right through them, but they wouldn't *leave*. He'd been wrong to think it was getting better.

"If you could just help me find my way, I'll get out of your hair," said the bespectacled woman in a long cotton dress.

"That bastard pulled a *knife* on me," said a man with a posh British accent, arms crossed and frowning fiercely.

"I really think something must have happened to him, but I can't get my phone to work. Couldn't I just use yours to call the police? Please? Can I at least do that much?" The girl from the bar was still going on about her brother.

Childishly, Anton covered his eyes and pressed his back into the brick behind him. "Go away, go away, *please*, just go away." If he could only make it away from here, he could call his neurologist tomorrow and come clean about the hallucinations. There was no way he could go back into work. Jaime would have to make do without him.

"Hey, man, what's going on?" A fourth voice joined the other three entreating him, and Anton reluctantly opened his eyes to see the newcomer, a leather-jacketed woman with a mane of thick, frizzy hair and tawny skin cast golden by the streetlight. She moved hesitantly, like someone approaching an anxious animal, trying not to spook him. As if more hallucinations mattered at this point. He'd officially lost it.

"Not real," he said, closing his eyes again. "None of you are real."

"Bit of a loon, are you?" the British man said. "Wonderful. I finally find someone to help, and you can't even help yourself."

“It’s okay,” the woman approaching him said. “I’m right here, okay? One hundred percent real. I’m a police officer, see?” She reached for something at her waist and showed him a badge. “I’m just trying to help.”

His hallucinations had never tried to help *him* before. They’d always wanted him to help them with something, or just to talk his ear off, like the old woman at the hospital.

Anton braced himself. It wasn’t going to get better if he didn’t get out of here. Even if they could follow him home, he’d rather hallucinate there than in the weed-rank alley. “Not real,” he reminded himself. He held his arms in front of his face as if that could somehow protect him and tried to step through the most recent arrival.

She stumbled backward. “Bad idea, buddy.” She moved again, too fast for him to follow, and Anton was bodily turned and pinned to the wall. She wrenched his arm up behind his back to immobilize him. His shoulder throbbed with pain.

Shocked and relieved, Anton realized that the woman who’d claimed to be a police officer wasn’t another hallucination. “Oh, thank God. You’re real.” A moment later, he realized he’d just *assaulted* a police officer, and that could get him in a lot of trouble. He’d spent a few nights in jail before and he didn’t want to repeat the experience. He’d finally decided to get his life on track, and it turned out he was too fucking crazy to manage it. “I’m so sorry. I thought —”

“That I wasn’t real. I got that.” The woman paused. Her hold on his arm was firm. “If I let you go, are you going to try to hit me again?”

Anton shook his head. The pressure on his shoulder socket released. He slumped against the wall, too exhausted to remain on his feet. He stumbled a few steps away from the woman and slid down the wall to sit. The rough brick caught at his shirt and scraped his arms, but he was beyond caring. The pain, at least, was real.

Facing the rest of the alley again, he saw that his hallucinations had disappeared. He was alone with the officer. He took a deep, shaky breath. The street wasn't quiet – shouting bar patrons, thumping music, street traffic and approaching sirens filled the night – but his head felt still, by contrast.

“You were kind of disturbing the peace there, man,” the woman said. “I can't let you stay here.”

She crouched down to his level but let him keep the distance he'd put between them. Now that he knew she was an actual person, he looked her over more closely. Though it was hard to tell now, Anton thought she might be nearly as tall as him. She was long-limbed and slender, and held herself with the casual self-assurance of a woman truly comfortable in her own skin.

“I'm supposed to be working,” he told her. He knew he couldn't go back inside. In the din and chaos of the bar, it would be too difficult to tell if everyone else could see the customers he interacted with.

“You can't go back to work like this, bud,” she said. “Go home, sleep it off. Tell –”

The approaching emergency vehicles came to a stop in front of the bar, two ambulances and a cop car, and she stopped. The officers and EMTs spilled out and rushed for the doors. Anton remembered the scream that had preceded his exit. He wondered vaguely what had happened. Plenty of crazy shit had happened on his shifts before, and he'd never seen a response like this.

“I'll be right back,” the woman said. Anton watched as she walked over to speak to the ambulance driver. Whatever he said after she flashed him her badge, she didn't like it; the strength and easy confidence left her posture as he spoke.



“What happened? Did somebody get hurt?”

Anton whipped his head around at the sound of the girlish voice. The college girl was back, bouncing anxiously on the balls of her feet as she stared at the ambulances.

She glanced down at him. “Are you okay? What are you doing on the ground? I wouldn’t sit on the sidewalks here if I were you, dude. People, like, puke out here.”

That was... more coherent than his hallucinations usually were. They didn’t ever seem to really notice *him*, just treated him like a vehicle to something they needed.

“Do you want to go see what’s going on?” She tilted her head toward the street. “Come on, I’ll give you a hand up.” She seemed to have forgotten that she couldn’t touch him. Anton ignored the hand she offered and pushed slowly to his feet. Behaving as normally as she was, he could almost forget that she wasn’t real.

They reached the mouth of the alley as the EMTs rushed out with two people on gurneys. The first was a young man, the front of his shirt covered in vomit and a red ventilator obscuring half of his face. Anton only glanced at the second long enough to realize that it wasn’t a patient, but a body zipped into one of those black bags like they used on CSI.

The college girl wailed. “Oh my God! Tim!” She rushed forward, not even noticing as she passed through one of the EMTs in her desperation to get to the gurney carrying the young man. “Tim. Tim! What happened to him?” She turned to the EMTs. “Please! He’s my brother. Tell me what happened!”

Anton stared in shock as the girl interacted with the reality around him. If she’d come from his imagination, she shouldn’t have a brother to find in the real world.

The officer from the alleyway walked over. “They’re not the first.”

Anton shook his head slowly. “You can’t see her, can you?” he said, though he already knew the answer.

“See who?” she asked. “Tell me what you’re seeing.”

“There’s –” His voice caught. He stopped and tried again. “There’s a girl. She’s crying and yelling at the EMTs.” He glanced at the officer, then away again. “She says the guy on the stretcher is her brother.”

“Holy shit,” the woman breathed. “Holy shit. You’re a Betweenener.”

Anton blinked at her. “I’m a what?”

“A Betweenener,” she repeated. She frowned, looking thoughtful. “How did you die?”

A chill rippled down Anton’s spine. “How did you know that?”

“Well, that’s how it happens, right?” Her frown deepened. “At least, that’s how my dad explained it. You died, temporarily, and now you can see the ghosts of souls that haven’t crossed over.”

Ghosts. A burst of hysterical laughter escaped Anton before he could stop it. “You’re as crazy as I am.”

Anton didn’t believe in ghosts. Hell, he didn’t believe in an afterlife of any kind. This life was what people got, and hoping for more just seemed like an excuse to avoid living this one to the fullest or to guilt people into good behavior like prisoners working toward the promise of parole.

“I can prove it.” She turned to the EMTs pushing the second gurney and called out to them. “Hey guys, hold up.”

A frisson of unease ran through Anton as she gripped his arm and pulled him forward.

\* \* \* \* \*

Liz felt slightly guilty as she tugged the guy forward, both for dragging him against his will and for what she was about to show him. She was used to ignoring the feeling of *anger-annoyance-discomfort* as she cuffed and pushed a perp into her car, but this was different. She was trying to help this guy. She just didn't know how to peel this band-aid off slowly.

"Open it up," she told the EMTs. They glanced at each other and shrugged, then the one at the head reached up and tugged down the zipper.

"What the fuck?" the guy she still had a grip on said, trying to jerk back away from her. "What the —"

He stopped cold as the flap of the bag was pulled back to show the face of the young girl who'd died. Her face was unnaturally white against the black of the bag, her open, unseeing eyes bloodshot and the corners of her mouth crusted with vomit and blood. White powder ringed her nostrils. For a moment, Liz saw Taylor there, a ruined version of the smiling, light-skinned girl in the high school graduation photo her mother had shown her. Grief swelled, tightening her throat. But this girl was different, white instead of mixed-race, the angles of her chin and cheekbones sharper than Taylor's. She'd been pretty, Liz thought, although it was hard to tell beneath the effluvia of death. Though they wouldn't know for sure until the ME was done with her, she would put her money down on strychnine and cocaine, just like the others.

*Shock-disbelief-shock-shock-shock* stuttered off of the man by her side. She released her hold, and he continued to stare at the girl in the bag. Liz nodded at the EMT's. "Okay. That's enough."

They covered the girl, zipped the bag, and continued on to their vehicle to take her to the morgue.

"I don't understand," the man said. "It's not — this isn't possible."

“Isn’t it?” Liz said quietly.

He shook his head and stumbled back to the alleyway. Liz followed. He sat heavily on one of the benches and shifted to fish a pack of cigarettes out of his back pocket. He tapped it against his arm with more force than necessary and shook one out into his trembling hand.

“Look,” Liz said, “I know this probably all seems nuts right now. You almost died, you started seeing ghosts, and you’re having a hard time figuring out what’s real and what’s not. But you’re not alone. There’s a whole world of people like you out there. Other Betweeners, but other types of people, too. We call ourselves Spinners.”

*Disbelief* became *skepticism* and he raised an eyebrow at her while he lit his cigarette. “So you’re saying you’re one, too? Then how come you couldn’t see all the dead people too?”

Liz reminded herself that it *would* sound crazy to someone who hadn’t been raised among other Spinners. She’d had the benefit of her whole family being Empaths; she’d been the last of her siblings to come into her abilities, so she’d been well prepared when her emotional awareness had manifested. She tried to imagine being thrust into the Spinners’ community blind, with no idea what was happening, thinking you were going crazy. It was all but inconceivable to her.

“I’m an Empath, not a Betweenner. I feel other people’s emotions.” The only ghost Liz had ever seen had been on one of those French Quarter tours for tourists, and she was pretty sure that had just been a well-placed projection. “I’m Liz, by the way.”

The man’s eyebrows went up. “That sounds exhausting. One set of feelings is bad enough.”

Liz let out a humorless laugh. “Tell me about it. So. What’s your name?”

“Anton,” he said. “Anton Peretta.”

Liz settled down next to him on the bench. “Nice to meet you, Anton.”

He looked at her for a long minute. His dark eyes were bloodshot with exhaustion. Liz wondered how long he’d been living like this, thinking he was hallucinating because he didn’t know what he was. How many Betweeners suffered the same fate, or worse, because no Spinner ever caught on and brought them into the fold?

“The girl in the –” Anton stopped, made a face, and tried again. *Sadness-regret-resignation* softened his voice. His disbelief had waned. “That girl. She didn’t know she was dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Liz said. She looked more closely at him, a new idea taking shape as she thought of the victims no longer lost, victims who could tell their own stories if there was someone to translate from the afterlife for them. She thought of Taylor Jacobsen, the bright young woman who’d become one more ashen-faced body in the morgue. She thought of the family who would never be whole with their daughter gone.

It had never occurred to her before except as a flight of fancy on her most frustrated days at work. Betweeners were rare, the one type of Spinner who required both genetic predisposition and a triggering life event to come into their abilities. It usually happened late in life, when heart attacks and strokes took people temporarily beyond the bounds of life.

Of course, her idea would only work if Anton was willing to help. “Do you know why I was out here tonight?” she asked.

“To get a drink?” he said drily. Liz was pretty sure he was kidding.

“Seven people have died this week from a batch of cocaine cut with strychnine. Even more are in the hospital. I’m pretty sure that girl got the same product. She and her brother.”

Anton looked out toward the street. Liz wondered if the girl's ghost was still there, or if maybe she'd gone with her brother to the hospital. The ambulances were long gone, but the patrol car Liz's colleagues had come in was still there. They were undoubtedly holding the scene for a Crime Scene Unit. As if they'd find anything useful in the overused bar bathrooms where the two victims had been found.

"Poisoned?" Anton said. His *sadness-surprise-anger* prickled at Liz.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Liz admitted. Hope comingled with the grief that had clung to her since she'd made the notification. "But how would you like to help me find out?"

## STORM WARNING

He came into the café like a Louisiana thunderstorm, crackling with dark intensity that prickled across Tabitha's skin. The front door clattered shut behind him.

She finished setting the chicory coffee to brew before she glanced back toward the door. Just as she'd expected, an aura of shadows and storm clouds surrounded the denim-jacketed man seating himself at the table nearest the entrance.

"Ooh, dibs." Tabitha's fellow waitress, Cat, had her hip propped against the counter and was eyeing the newcomer with an anticipatory grin.

If the man was a thunderstorm, Cat was a sunrise, pink and gold and the fresh hope of dawn spilling out over everyone around her.

"Unless *you'd* rather," Cat teased, nudging Tabitha with her elbow.

Tabitha smothered her distaste and squinted at the man again, trying to see through his aura to his face. She had trouble seeing men the way other women did; their faces rarely matched the truth she saw and felt painted across their skin. The man's sun-brown skin and hard-planed face suggested Native ancestry. To Tabitha's prejudiced eye, his features looked sharp and unwelcoming.

"He's not my type," Tabitha said after a moment, settling on the same response she gave every time Cat pointed out a cute guy and offered to let Tabitha serve him. Since she'd started working at the café a few months ago, Cat had been determined to find Tabitha a date.

"I'm starting to think your type doesn't exist," Cat grumbled, but there was no bite to the words. She plucked her order book from her apron and flitted across the café to take the man's order.

Cat wasn't entirely wrong. Not that Tabitha didn't have a "type," but it was impossible to convey to a non-Seer that for Tabitha, attraction wasn't about the physical. The people Tabitha was attracted to were those whose auras complemented their form, whose energy sang with beauty.

People, she could admit only in the privacy of her own mind (and sometimes not even there), like Cat. Cat, who shimmered and glowed, who was graceful and light and whose pique never sparked for more than one iridescent moment before she shook off whatever was bothering her. Cat, who was delicate and feminine in a way that tall, solid Tabitha could never dream of being.

A hiss of steam announced that the coffee was done brewing. Tabitha carried the now-full pot around to her own tables, topping up half-drunk cups and dropping the ticket by the elbow of a tourist with a stagnant, pond-water aura. He probably thought his half-buttoned, tropical shirt invoked Tom Selleck as Magnum P.I., but really, he just looked sloppy and hungover as he slouched over his plate of toast and eggs. She sidestepped his outstretched leg and kept one eye on Cat, who was "putting her flirt on."

Cat leaned against the chair opposite the stormy stranger, her head cocked to one side, and fiddled with her pen in a way that was simultaneously innocent and suggestive. The man's grin looked predatory as he said something that made Cat laugh.

Cat snagged the coffeepot from Tabitha, their fingers brushing each other, and went to deposit a cup of coffee on the stranger's table.

"So?" Tabitha asked when Cat returned to the drink station. She knew Cat wanted her to ask.



Cat's sunrise rippled with orange-gold happiness. "His name's Jasper, and he says he's just passing through for a couple of weeks. He says he's 'not from any one place,' which is kind of sexy, don't you think?"

"What does that even mean?" Tabitha said.

Cat shrugged and tore a ticket from her book for the family of five in the corner. "He just seems kind of mysterious, you know?"

Tabitha agreed, but she didn't think Cat should be excited about it. Mysterious could mean a lot of things in this city, and drifters were rarely "just passing through" for anything good. The front door opened to admit a young couple with garishly bright auras, one like the kind of powdery rust that stained clothes and the other a psychedelic tie-dye swirl, and she went to greet them.

A little while later, Cat returned from the stranger's table glowing and bouncing with enthusiasm. "He asked me out for drinks later," she said.

"Does he know you're not old enough to drink?" Tabitha asked. Cat was nineteen, three years younger than Tabitha.

Cat waved her off. "Like I ever get carded."

She *should* be carded, tiny and youthful as she was, but Cat could charm her way past any doorman without trying. Tabitha was pretty sure Cat didn't realize how easy things were for her, or rather, that they weren't as easy for everyone else.

"Anyway," Cat said, "would you mind if I left a little early today? It's been pretty quiet, but I hate to leave you alone."

Even as anxiety twisted in Tabitha's gut and she sensed the continued crackle of thunder behind her, she pasted on an indulgent smile at her friend's excitement. "Don't worry about me. You guys have fun."

\* \* \* \* \*

Throughout the rest of the week, Jasper developed a pattern. He came in each day before lunchtime and lingered throughout the afternoon, then wheedled Cat into leaving work early to spend her evenings with him. When Cat stopped by his table, Jasper never missed an opportunity to touch her: a squeeze of her hand, a caress at her waist, an intimate stroke down the back of her thigh. His touches seemed proprietary. When Cat took her breaks, he joined her out back, and Cat came back flushed and mussed, her long blonde hair a little untamed, while Jasper looked like the cat who'd eaten the canary.

The haze of navy and rumbling grey that surrounded him seemed to grow more unsettled with the passing days, though Tabitha didn't know him well enough to read anything more from it. In turn, she became increasingly uncomfortable with each hour that he spent at the table by the door.

"I thought he wasn't your type," Cat teased when she caught Tabitha looking.

"He's not," Tabitha said, blinking until her vision refocused on her surroundings instead of the energy rippling around Jasper. "I just – you should be careful around him." The warning slipped out before Tabitha could stop herself from voicing it.

Cat frowned. "What do you mean? He's been really sweet."

"I have a bad feeling, is all," Tabitha said. *He's like a human hurricane, and I don't want him to blow you away.* She wished there was a way to share her Sight with Cat, so she could see him as Tabitha did. *You're too good for him.*

Cat rolled her eyes. “You worry too much.” She tucked an arm around Tabitha’s waist and squeezed lightly, leaning into her for a brief moment. A thrill sparked through Tabitha. “I know how to take care of myself. Promise.”

At home that night, Tabitha found herself reliving that brief moment of connection. Cat *was* good – good and pure and lovely. Was it possible that Tabitha was letting her affection for Cat cloud her judgment of the man pursuing her? That she *wanted* to sense darkness and danger in him, to have an excuse to push her friend away from him?

Her cat, Snake, padded into the room. He sat at her feet and blinked calmly up at her, then chuffed and hopped up into her lap.

“You’re right,” she said, scratching Snake behind his ears. “I’m overthinking this.” Still, she resolved to keep her reservations to herself.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cat and Jasper arrived together the next morning. Tabitha noticed them outside the front doors, saw Cat reach up on tiptoe to loop her arms around his neck and tug him down for a long, slow kiss. Saw the way his dark clouds engulfed her glow. When they broke apart, he leaned in to murmur something in her ear. Cat nodded and bit her lip, and Jasper ran his hands down her back and tugged her against him for another kiss.

It reminded Tabitha of her parents. Her father knew how to be charming; he would tease, and flirt, and make her mother feel beautiful with his words and with his touches when he was in a good mood. He had touched her like he owned her. But when his mood turned hard and nasty, his touches did too. Tabitha had learned not to trust the good days in fear of the bad, but her father knew exactly how to earn her mother’s forgiveness. He was a Seer, like Tabitha, and he used what he learned from people’s auras to manipulate them to his advantage.

Outside, Cat danced out of Jasper's grip with a laugh and pushed through the front door of the café. "I have to go to work!" she admonished.

She flushed with embarrassment as she saw Tabitha watching her. Tabitha felt her own cheeks warm as well, at being caught looking. She ran her thumb over the curving scar on the palm of her right hand, a token of a time when she'd been eight, learning to cook, and her father held her hand to lip of the pan: a burn to match the food she'd burnt.

Cat tied her apron around her waist and punched in, bumping her hip against Tabitha's on the way past in an affectionate greeting.

Tabitha swallowed the sick feeling the unpleasant memory brought and turned her attention back to the lemons she'd been slicing. "You really like him, huh?" she said softly.

Cat brightened a little, and the pink hues in her aura flared gently outward; Tabitha forced herself not to read into that, not to see it as Cat reaching out to her. "I really do."

*He doesn't deserve you.* "You deserve someone who makes you happy," she said instead.

Cat's smile was sunshine, and she pulled Tabitha into a quick hug. "So do you, you know."

Tabitha forced a smile of her own. "Maybe someday."

The next day was Cat's afternoon off, and when Jasper came in at his usual time, Tabitha was stuck serving him in her stead. Her uneasiness peaked with proximity to the maelstrom of his presence, and she clenched her pen and order pad tighter to keep her hands from shaking. He wasn't her father. He didn't have any power over her.

He didn't look up at Tabitha until she was standing directly in front of him. "Where's Cat?"

"She's off Thursdays. Didn't she tell you?"

He grunted a negative.

“Coffee?” she asked when he didn’t offer an order.

He made another wordless sound, and she took it for assent. Annoyed by his rudeness and eager to be away from his discomfiting aura, she hurried back to the station to retrieve the coffeepot and fill a cup for him.

She deposited it on his table and paused before she walked away. “She’s special, you know,” she couldn’t help saying.

“Hmm?” Jasper’s eyes were dark and penetrating. *Dangerous*, her senses warned her again, as if the rising adrenaline stifling her ability to breathe wasn’t enough.

“Cat. She’s special.” Tabitha tightened her grip on the coffeepot and tried not to shift uncomfortably under that harsh gaze. Her mouth was cottony dry. “She’s too good for you.”

Jasper laughed. It was a rumbling, quiet laugh – distant thunder and the itch of oncoming lightning – and Tabitha flinched back, just a little. “I have no doubt of that,” he said.

No longer able to withstand his frowning stare, Tabitha turned and walked away. As she did, she heard the thunder in his aura change, become the rumbling of a growl, and an animal wildness brushed against her awareness. She faltered with sudden understanding.

*Shifter.*

The coffeepot nearly slipped from her fingers and she had to pause to prevent herself fleeing outright. Tabitha had never met a Shifter, but she’d heard stories: people who combined the most lethal aspects of human and animal in one, instinct and intellect merged to fearsome effect.

In the wake of her realization, Tabitha was more convinced than ever that Cat should have nothing to do with Jasper, but she had no idea what to do about it. She was a Seer; she

couldn't offer any threat to a man who could take the form of an apex predator; she likely couldn't even offer threat to a Normal man.

Memories of fear and helplessness earned at her father's hands trembled through her, and she could barely suppress them to make it through the rest of her shift. She went home after work and cuddled Snake until her anxiety finally subsided.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cat arrived for work the next day refreshed and glowing. Tabitha basked in her vibrant warmth as they unrolled floor mats and prepared for the day. Cat chattered about her day off as she folded paper napkins around mostly-clean flatware. A childhood friend was in town visiting, one she hadn't seen since the girl had moved away five years ago, and they'd spent the day like tourists in their own city.

Jasper's arrival only brightened Cat's enthusiasm, but instead of taking his usual seat, Jasper stood inside the front door and scowled. He kept his arms folded across his broad chest until Cat walked over to greet him.

Tabitha made a show of bussing a nearby table so she could overhear their conversation.

Cat wrapped her arms around his neck and tilted up on tiptoe to kiss him, then pulled back. "What's wrong?"

"Where were you yesterday?" From the corner of her eye, Tabitha saw the expanding ripple of the storm clouds around Jasper cast a shadow over Cat's vivid hues.

"I was out with a friend," Cat said. Confusion tinged her voice. "It was my day off."

"Did you think that just because you weren't working, I wouldn't want to see you?"

"Well, no, but I haven't seen Amy in five years. I've seen you every day for a week."

Lightning flashed in her periphery, and Tabitha's fingers slipped on the glasses she was collecting. They thunked noisily onto the Formica tabletop. Jasper turned his scowl in her direction as he noticed the audience to their conversation.

"Come here," Jasper said. His hand wrapped Cat's wrist, and he tugged her back out the front door. They carried on their conversation outside the front window. Jasper didn't let go of Cat's arm, and Tabitha saw her wince and pull it back as he spoke more intently.

When they came back inside, Cat's aura and excitement were both dimmed. She rolled her wrist like it hurt, and her posture had lost its dancer's poise. She saw Tabitha watching and ducked her head.

"What was that about?" Tabitha asked, though she'd heard. She couldn't keep the brittle anger out of her voice.

"He just missed me yesterday, that's all."

Tabitha ground her teeth. "I told him it was your day off. He can't expect you to spend every minute with him that you aren't at work."

"It's not like that," Cat said. "He's only here for a few weeks. He wants to make the most of the time we have."

Tabitha had heard variations on those same justifications before, and she felt sick hearing them from Cat, who was usually so bright and effortlessly self-assured. Her father hadn't liked it when her mother went out, either. By the time Tabitha was eight or nine, her mother hadn't been allowed to go anywhere without him, even to visit her own parents. No matter how constricting he became, her mother always explained away his anger and possessiveness.

Tabitha pictured her mother's aura, formerly a jagged, crystalline amethyst that had eroded down to a featureless near-grey swath over years of marriage. She couldn't help but

imagine how continued exposure to Jasper's dark pall would dim and diminish Cat's active sunrise.

She couldn't let that happen.

It didn't take long to formulate a plan. The African-American lionesses who ruled the French Quarter were known for their hold on the smuggling trade and their ruthless business dealings. Edith Jones was their matriarch, and her bar, The Savannah, was the center of her territory. It was unspoken law that other Shifters weren't welcome. The French Quarter wasn't a big place. If Edith didn't already know Jasper was in town, she would now. The lionesses hadn't gained their reputation without a degree of brutality. Tabitha was banking on that now.

She told Cat she wasn't feeling well and asked her to cover the end of her shift. Cat, eager to repay the favors Tabitha had done her over the past few days, agreed easily and sympathetically ushered her friend out the door.

It took a bit of wandering for Tabitha to find the right place. She'd only ever cared to know which part of the neighborhood to avoid, but eventually she found the dirty yellow entrance with its hand-painted sign swinging above the front door.

The dimly lit dive was mostly empty in the early afternoon. Only a handful of patrons sat around at the heavy wood tables, and they leered as she made her way to the bar. She wondered if it was true that animals could smell fear. Her hands trembled slightly, and she braced them on the sticky surface of the bar.

The whipcord-thin young woman behind the bar felt like prairie grass and sharp wind, dry gold and high noon. Now that Tabitha knew what she was looking for, she saw the edge of wildness that tinged the woman's presence. This was definitely the right place.



“I have a message for Edith Jones,” she said. Outside, a lone trumpeter played for pocket change on the street corner. The sound of his horn was sharp in the sudden silence that had fallen over the bar at her words.

“I’d –” She could feel the pressure of a dozen wild auras pressing in against her back, and her throat closed against the swelling fear. She sucked in a shaky breath before she could continue and lowered her voice so only the bartender could hear her words. “I’d like to report an interloper. Another Shifter in the Quarter.”

The woman’s eyebrows rose in surprise, and Tabitha rushed through the rest, anxious to be done and leave as quickly as possible. She gave the woman a name, a description, and a request that came out sounding more like a plea: do what you have to, but leave the girl out of it.

She made her way back down to Royal Street to wait for Jasper to leave the café. She needed to be sure he would really be gone. She watched from the front window of an antique shop lined with gilded mirrors until he stepped out the front door onto the sidewalk.

She ducked out of the shop and followed until he turned the corner onto Iberville. She hung back at the corner so he wouldn’t notice her following him. The street always resembled an alley to Tabitha, with its flat, residential facades rising two stories over the one-way strip of asphalt. No other pedestrians were on the narrow stretch between Royal and Bourbon.

A half dozen dark-skinned women with wild auras seemed to melt out of shadows that didn’t belong in the bright summer afternoon, surrounding Jasper so quickly he didn’t have time to see them coming.

The growl that ripped out of Jasper’s chest drove a spike of cold adrenaline through Tabitha’s spine and she couldn’t contain her whimper. *This was what you wanted*, she reminded herself.

A hand fell on Tabitha's shoulder and she flinched away. "Go." It was the woman from the bar, her desert-gold aura a tightly wound corona around her.

Tabitha didn't respond. She just turned and ran for home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Saturday was meant to be Tabitha's day off, but she couldn't stay away from the café.

The screen inset in the front door rattled when she pushed it open, and Cat turned from the table she was delivering coffee to with a perky, hopeful look that vanished when she saw Tabitha. She raised a hand in greeting and went back to serving her customers.

Tabitha took a seat near the waitress station and waited for Cat to finish and come over.

"Shouldn't you be enjoying your day off?" Cat said.

Tabitha shrugged. "I didn't have anywhere to be. You seem upset."

Cat's shoulders slumped, and she tried to brush it off, but to Tabitha, her anxiety was almost palpable. Bloody red suffused the pink of her sunrise, reminding Tabitha of an old superstition: "red sky at morning, sailors take warning." It was meant to warn of a coming storm. Tabitha hoped in this case it meant that the storm was gone.

"Jasper didn't show up for our date last night, and he hasn't been in today. I'm worried. What if something happened to him?"

Guilt and relief tangled in Tabitha's chest. "I'm sure he's fine," she said. "Maybe he just had to leave town early." She didn't know how far the lionesses had gone to protect their territory, whether Jasper would have gotten the chance to leave town at all. She didn't want to know.

\* \* \* \* \*

Weeks passed, and then a month, and Cat's aura slowly shifted back to normal. Harsh red slipped back toward gentle pink; her golden-orange glow brightened. Over the first few days of Jasper's absence, Cat looked hopefully toward the door every time it opened, but soon she fell back into the rhythm of the work, and eventually, the bounce returned to her step.

Without a man to sweep Cat away at the end of their shifts, Tabitha made inroads into Cat's social life. They walked down to the Central Grocery to buy muffalettas and ate them on the steps of the artillery park, where they could laugh at the tourists around Jackson Square, or they went back to Tabitha's tiny shotgun apartment to drink cheap wine. She learned that Cat wanted to be an artist, and after two bottles of wine one particular night, Tabitha convinced Cat to let her flip through her sketchbook.

She was surprised to find a portrait of herself among the pages, leaning beside the coffeemaker in the café in a moment of quiet, her eyes closed and her head tilted back. Cat had softened the firm, square lines of her face. She looked almost pretty, the way Cat drew her.

Then, six weeks after they'd seen the last of Jasper, Cat called out of work three days in a row, complaining of a stomach bug.

On the fourth day, Tabitha returned to her apartment to find Cat sitting on the front steps, her face streaked with tears and her blonde hair obviously unwashed. The red tinge was back at the edges of her aura, suppressing her glow.

"I'm not sick," Cat said. She sniffed and pulled her knees up against her chest, looking tinier than ever on Tabitha's front stoop. "I took a few tests on my own when I figured it out. I went to the doctor today and he confirmed it."

Tabitha couldn't say anything for a long moment while she absorbed what Cat was saying. She'd thought that with Edith Jones' interference, they would be free of Jasper. But like

the scar her father had burned into her palm, Jasper had left Cat with something permanent to remember him by.

“Do you know what you’re going to do?” Tabitha asked. *Are you going to keep it?* she meant, but that sounded too harsh, too judgmental.

Fresh tears spilled over Cat’s cheeks, and she shook her head, dropping it toward her chest as she sobbed.

“Okay,” Tabitha said. “You don’t have to know right now. Do you want to stay with me while you figure it out?” *You can stay with me as long as you want.*

She drew Cat to her feet, and Cat leaned into her side as Tabitha led her into the house.

## THE GREATEST FORM OF FREEDOM

*RAF Anglesey, Wales, 1943*

The cooks had outdone themselves, Sam thought as he walked into the canteen for dinner on Christmas night. The usually barren space was festooned with no fewer than three fully bedecked evergreen trees. The trees would have been easy to come by, if the girls had wrangled the unoccupied soldiers into helping them, but he couldn't figure where they'd come up with the decorations.

Melancholy and cheer had comingled uncomfortably in RAF Valley all day. There were no missions, no new orders to be carried out until after the holiday, and though no one dared to speak it aloud for fear of jinxing the barracks, there was an international tradition of ceasefire on Christmas. Yet although the men appreciated the respite, thoughts of home weighed more heavily than usual.

"Well of course, Angie couldn't let that stand," Will Gennaro was saying as Sam took a seat with his crew, "so she slapped him right across his ugly mug. And the dumb bastard just looked at my mom and said 'Well, I didn't expect that.'"

The men burst out into raucous laughter. Jim Davis withdrew a flask from his jacket and passed it to their entertainer. Gennaro's bawdy sense of humor always reminded Sam of his younger brother Charles, who used awful jokes to brighten long hours of grueling oysterman's work.

Gennaro took on a thoughtful look. "Course, she still went and married him, so I guess that goes to show how bright my sister is," The men's laughter redoubled.

A bang at the front of the hall silenced the room. An English airman had leapt onto one of the tables. "Happy Christmas, lads!" he said. "I want to thank the lovely ladies in the kitchen for

giving us all a bit of home here in the Valley. And if you don't mind – me and the boys want to return the favor as well as we can.”

Sam glanced around the table. Davis caught his look and shrugged.

And then the music started. The violin took up first with a long, pure note to set the pitch, followed by a series of notes that sounded at once familiar and strange on the strings. Sam identified the tune just as the man on the table began to sing in a rich baritone. “Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king!”

By the end of the first line, another dozen voices had joined the airman's carol. The song went on and more voices rose to fill the hall. As the second verse began, a sweet blend of sopranos fell into the melody as the kitchen girls came out. Sam sang along and remembered standing beside his brothers and sisters in the church pews back home, listening to the organist and the choir perform on Christmas morning.

The violinist improvised a bridge at the end of the song and moved into “Angels We Have Heard on High.” Heaven's flyboys seemed to be the theme of the night. The song struck another memory for Sam, this time of Mama humming the tune as she strung garlands on his family's tree while Da taught his sister Dottie how to make the wind sing along. Everyone in the family was a Wind-Spinner, and Dottie had watched Sam and Charles learn to call the air to hand before she came into her own powers. Sam had never figured out the fine-tuned control needed to create music from the air; his talents were better suited to working his uncle's skipjack, pushing wind into the sails when there wasn't so much as a breeze to stir the Chesapeake beneath them.

Grief struck Sam as he thought of Dottie. She'd been angry with him for enlisting. Never one to hold back for the sake of manners, Dottie had socked him right on the nose when he told

her. “Charles is worrying himself sick over the draft ever since he turned eighteen, and you’re stupid enough to *volunteer*? What are Da and Uncle Jack going to do without you on the skip?”

“Peter’s almost old enough to sail now, and I’ll send my wages back home,” Sam told her. He’d thought that part through, but the truth was that he’d always dreamt of the chance to fly for real. Dottie didn’t understand; Calling the wind on the water wasn’t enough for Sam.

Sam had been five years old when Charles Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic in *The Spirit of St. Louis*, and he’d followed every story of air travel published or broadcasted since. To be truly one with his element was the greatest form of freedom Sam could imagine. When the call had come for men to serve in the Army Air Forces, Sam hadn’t been able to resist; not even knowing that the casualties were higher than in any other branch of service.

The violinist’s tune changed again, picking up a driving pace. Sam struggled to place the new melody. When a handful of Irishmen on the far side of the canteen shouted out their approval and jumped to their feet, he realized the musician had abandoned Christmas tunes altogether. This was a dancing song, meant for a different kind of festivities.

The soldiers made quick work of pushing the tables out of the way. Sam stood to help move his table, but didn’t join the men and women who came together at the center of the floor, forgetting for this moment that there was a war on, that any or all of them could be ordered to their deaths tomorrow.

Sam closed his eyes and reached his senses out into the air. He couldn’t make music himself, but he could feel it. The notes caressed him like a lover’s gentle fingers; beyond the music he could feel the push-and-pull of the dancers’ rhythm, air swirling through loosed hair and between quick-stepping feet.

A hand grabbed Sam's, and he opened his eyes. A dark-haired, blue-eyed nurse stood before him. "Come and dance with me," she said in a soft Irish lilt, and he let her draw him out onto the floor. The dance was new to Sam, but he let his sense of the air propel him through the moves; he was happy to let the smiling girl in his arms take the lead, though if any of the fellows noticed, he wouldn't hear the end of it back in the bunks later.

Up close, the girl reminded him of Ruthie Jameson. She had the same bright glint in her eyes, warning of humor or wickedness when the mood struck her right. He had a feeling this girl, like Ruthie, was dangerous as the sea in a storm when she got riled.

He'd gone to tell Ruthie he'd enlisted the day after he told Dottie. They'd meandered along the wooden walkway at the Inner Harbor, where the breeze carried the salty-fresh smell of the bay in to cover the unpleasant stench of sweating workmen and rotting fish. There'd been tears in her wide blue eyes when she realized he was saying goodbye. She'd let him kiss her for the first time, right there on the docks, before he'd walked her back to her parents' house. He hadn't seen her again after that, but he still held onto the memory of her soft hands and softer lips.

"Are you all right?"

Sam looked down at the girl he'd been dancing with. The song had ended. Her eyes, greyer than Ruthie's, he realized how, met his with a pucker of concern. He released her abruptly and took a step back. "Yes. Fine. Thanks for the dance, doll." He grimaced at how distracted he sounded. "Merry Christmas," he added belatedly.

A new song started, and the unfamiliar cadence of the violinist's tune scraped along Sam's nerves. It didn't feel like Christmas here. Despite the trees and the dancing and the company of his crew, Sam ached at the thought of his family back home, celebrating without



him. Back in Baltimore, he'd longed for the chance to explore the skies; now that he was here, he realized how much he'd given up to come. Every inch of the ocean between them plucked a new chord of pain in his chest.

The door to the hall opened to admit a few more soldiers who'd come to join the festivities. They brought a swirl of chill December air with them, and Sam felt its call. With one more awkward, half-formal acknowledgement of the girl who'd drawn him onto the dance floor, Sam took his leave of the celebration and escaped out into the night.

The bite of cold against his cheeks and the brisk awareness that breathing brought suddenly to his lungs felt more like home than the Christmas carols had. This, here, amidst the open air, was where he belonged. The wind followed wherever he went.

Sam took the long route through the Valley, enjoying the quiet that had fallen with a light dusting of snow. Scrubby patches of brown grass showed through in places, but still the white covering brought with it the sense of muffled stillness Sam associated with fresh snow.

He walked toward the hangars at the edge of the base, where he could get away from the faint sounds of the celebration emanating from the canteen. When he was sure there was no one around to see, he closed his eyes, stretched out his arms, and Called.

The breeze that stirred in answer was gentle, tickling over his fingers and through his hair. The burning numbness the cold brought didn't bother him; the joy of knowing the wind came for *him* was sweeter than the warmth of standing before the fireplace after a long day dredging oysters.

It had been Christmas three years ago when he'd given Dottie a kite, the same year Da had taught her to spin songs. He'd made it himself, but the real gift had been when he'd taken her out to fly it on the beach. The cold had painted her pale cheeks and nose bright red beneath

her thick wool cap, and he'd made her close her eyes and *feel* the kite, the same way Da had taught him to feel the wind in the sails. She'd never be a sailor, but he'd been able to give her that moment, to glimpse what the men in their family could do with their gift.

Standing in the Valley with the wind stirring up memories, Sam could almost hear her delighted laugh when she'd realized she was steering the kite on her own. When he returned to his bunk for the night, he was more at peace than any celebration with his crewmates could have made him.

\* \* \* \* \*

The morning after Christmas dawned misty and chill and brought new orders from the brass for the American crew. They were being transferred to the RAF base in Norfolk and would fly out later that morning.

Sam, as the *Leading Lady's* flight engineer, performed his pre-flight checks with time to spare. He emerged from the plane and walked to where Davis was speaking quietly with Schwartz, the crew's pilot.

"She's all buttoned up and ready to go, Lieutenant," Sam announced.

"All right," Schwartz called out to the crew. "Wheels up in ten!" He needn't have bothered. Most of the crew were already manning their stations aboard the aircraft, protected from the bite of the crisp Welsh air.

Sam headed back into the plane and was almost plowed over by Dean Nimitz as he rushed out.

"Lieutenant!" Nimitz scrambled down the steps and snapped a hasty salute.

"At ease, Sergeant. What's the problem?"

Sam heard the veiled amusement in Schwartz's response. Nimitz was the youngest of their already young crew, and as eager to please as the overgrown puppy he resembled. The crew liked to joke that he'd been made Radio Operator because he didn't know how to shut up. Gennaro, who treated Nimitz like a snotty kid brother, would say it was because Nimitz's ears, which stuck out from the side of his head, could receive a radio signal themselves if the plane's equipment was ever on the fritz.

"We've got word from Marham, sir. There's a storm rolling in and they're recommending we hold our orders. The tower here says we're cleared and expected to take off by oh-ten-hundred."

Schwartz closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "How long until the storm hits?"

"They're saying inside of the hour, sir. We'd be heading straight into it."

"All right. You'd better get me on that radio. I'll have a word with the tower."

Sam waited for the verdict with the rest of the crew in the belly of the plane. The *Leading Lady's* fuselage made for cramped quarters. She was meant to carry munitions, not men, and the rounded aluminum walls barely had space between them for two soldiers to stand shoulder to shoulder. Sam, accustomed to being in the open on the deck of the skip, always felt enclosed by the narrow space.

The crew could hear Schwartz swearing at someone on the other end of the radio line. It wasn't long before he returned and told the men to strap in and prepare themselves for a rough flight. "They said as long as we've got the B-17 to guide the way, there's nothing to stop us going up."

Sam nodded and headed for his place in the turret. The turret was the reason he'd fought and studied for the engineer's job. The flight engineer was also the top turret gunner on a Liberator's crew, and Sam had wanted the view that could only be had from the glass-domed seat at the top of the plane. It had taken hours of extra studying late at night, learning mechanical diagrams and systems analytics that didn't come naturally to an oysterman, but it had been worth the sleep he'd lost. When the *Leading Lady* took to the clouds, Sam was as close as he could get to the open skies.

The plane's ascent went smoothly. As soon as the aircraft's wheels left the runway, Sam stretched out his awareness to include the currents surrounding it. *This* was the experience he'd been willing to leave home for. There was something spectacularly impossible about the lightness and lift of the currents, their ability to carry several tons of aluminum and steel as easily as Dottie's kite. When Sam had newly come into his powers as a boy, he had stood at the bow of the skipjack and leaned forward well past the tipping point, almost lying on the air as he used only the wind to hold himself up. At the time, he had closed his eyes and could almost imagine it felt like flying. It hadn't come anywhere close to the swooping splendor of the real thing.

Sam could have passed the whole flight with his senses stretched beyond the wings like that, but shortly after they reached altitude, Gennaro called up to him. "Ford, Schwartz wants you up front."

Sam climbed down from his turret and made his way to the cockpit. "You wanted to see me, Lieutenant?"

Davis turned to give Sam a short nod of acknowledgment, but Schwartz responded without taking his eye off the skies. "Yeah, take a look at the damned compass, will you? The fool thing's spinning like a top, and I can't get a clear reading."

Sam peered over Davis's shoulder and frowned. The needle of the compass swung erratically, despite the *Lady*'s straight course. "Nothing I can do about that, sir. Compasses don't fail, they work on magnetic fields. Whatever this one's picking up, it's not magnetic north."

Sam gritted his teeth as Schwartz suggested something rude and anatomically improbable to do with his mother. "What's the use in having an engineer on board if he can't fix what needs fixing?"

Sam resisted the urge to reply in kind. "Sorry, Lieutenant. I'm an engineer, not a magician."

"We'll just have to keep a close tail on that B-17," Davis said, forever the most level-headed and pragmatic member of their crew.

And then a thick bank of fog swallowed the *Lady*.

Schwartz and Davis swore in tandem. "Dismissed," Schwartz said. "But tell Nimitz to get on with that B-17 right away."

Sam ran down to the Radio Operator to pass along the pilot's message and then joined the rest of the crew in the fuselage.

"Problem?" Gennaro asked.

Turbulence shuddered through the plane. The interior of the B-24 was criss-crossed with aluminum framing, and Sam grabbed hold of one of the strips for balance.

"We've got a compass failure, and we're heading into that storm," he murmured, trying to keep the other men from overhearing. "With the cloud cover, we're all but flying blind."

"Jesus," Gennaro said. His swarthy complexion paled. Despite his usual bravado, Sam knew Gennaro was often nervous on all but the smoothest flights. He'd been raised a thoroughly

New York City boy, and the highest he'd been before joining up had been the roof of his tenement building.

Sam agreed. "But as long as our guide plane keeps steady, we should make it through all right."

Though Sam had been discrete, there was no preventing the other men from hearing the instructions Nimitz shouted up to the pilots, passed along from the B-17's Radio Operator. The tension in the fuselage ratcheted higher as the storm rattled the plane. Sam considered climbing back up to his turret, where he'd have a more stable seat, but with the clouds pressing in around the glass, he would only feel more closed in. All the Wind-Spinning in the world couldn't make a difference against miles of thunderheads in all directions; his reach barely stretched the aircraft's full 110-foot wing span.

The B-17 Operator's next transmission announced that they had cleared the cloud cover. All the *Leading Lady* had to do was ascend and she would reach clear skies for the rest of the flight. The men in the fuselage breathed a collective sigh of relief and loosened their grips on the aluminum framing. Sam flexed his fingers, relieving the deep grooves left in his palms by the sharp edges of the frame. His ears popped as the *Lady* climbed higher. He could feel the force of the wind cutting against the wings and hear the rumble of the engine as it struggled to gain the skies.

Then – impact.

The sudden lurch threw every man in the fuselage forward. Sam tumbled over Gennaro and his knee twisted beneath him. Pain surged up his leg.

At the front of the plane, both pilots were cursing, and Nimitz relayed a frantic message to the B-17.

“Ford!” Schwartz shouted.

“Sir!” he gasped, pulling himself to his feet. He stumbled toward the cockpit, leaning heavily on the wall to support his damaged leg.

“We clipped the side of a goddamn mountain,” Schwartz said. “We’ve got one engine down and two damaged. Is there anything you can do to keep us in the air?”

“I can’t make repairs if we’re not on the ground.”

“If we don’t have at least two functioning engines, we will be,” Schwartz ground out.

“What do you expect me to do, climb out on the wing of the plane?” Sam said. He stretched his awareness back out to the wings, but could get no sense of how near to the ground they were. The nose of their plane was beginning to tilt downward. Schwartz and Davis were fighting a losing battle to control their descent. The first principal of flight was that an airplane’s nose had to be tipped to the heavens, even while landing. It was one of the first misconceptions of flight that the Army trained out of the airmen.

If they were going to crash, Sam might be able to protect himself. One of the things his Da had taught him was how to insulate himself in cushioning layers of air, a valuable skill when an unexpected storm could take down a small craft like theirs and strand a sailor in the middle of the bay. It wouldn’t be exactly the same, but he could feel the currents and prepared to tug them in around himself.

“Just do *something!*” Davis said. There was panic in his voice.

“Yes, sir,” Sam said.

Without the task at hand to relay feedback from the B-17, Nimitz was crying at his station, the fear manifesting in loud, messy tears.

“Come on, Dean, you’re too ugly to die,” Gennaro called down to him.

Sam had told Charles something similar, when Da had tried to teach him the Wind-wrapping trick. Charles had flailed about in the water, convinced he was going to drown. “What kind of oysterman doesn’t know how to swim?” Sam had taunted, but he’d buoyed Charles with the Wind until he could get his bearings himself. He hadn’t been able to bear witnessing his brother’s fear without acting.

Suddenly determined, Sam changed his course. He ran his mind back through his training as rapidly as he could. “Will!” he said. “With me!”

As an engineer, there wasn’t much he could do to control their descent. As a Wind-Spinner, he might have a chance. He’d spent years pushing and pulling to steer his uncle’s skipjack. Maybe, just maybe, he could push and pull enough to steer the *Leading Lady*.

“I’ve got you,” Gennaro said, slipping his shoulder under Sam’s arm with a grunt. “Where are we going?”

“I need you to go down to Engine Three and divert the fuel to Engine Four. I’m going to do what I can to salvage One.”

Sam thought his best chance would be to work from the wings, where the engines were housed. Gennaro supported him all the way to Engine One before he split off in the direction of Engine Three. The smell of gasoline warned Sam of another problem entirely: the fuel line had been severed and was leaking into the engine block.

Sam ignored the smell and focused on what he could control. Or at least, what he hoped he could.

He braced himself against the walls, closed his eyes, and *stretched* his mind out farther than he’d ever tried to reach. The sharp rush of the air currents cutting past the wings left Sam breathless. The plane was descending rapidly now.



Sam gathered up his willpower with every ounce of sweat and fear and adrenaline that was pumping through him and Called, louder and deeper than he'd ever Called before. The currents' natural movement fought his efforts. He strained for breath and ground his teeth so hard he thought they might crack.

He heard his Da's voice in his head, teaching him how to sail. "You can't make the wind go where it doesn't want to go. When you Call, don't force it. Make it *want* the same thing you do."

Months of feeling the currents from his turret had taught Sam what he needed to recreate. Instead of pushing against the downdrafts forcing the plane toward the ground, he focused on the heady sense of what flight was supposed to feel like. He thought of Dottie, making the wind sing along with Mama's Christmas tune, and of Mama's Christmas dinner with the family gathered around the table, and of Ruthie Jameson, and the long, dark curls that made him want to abandon propriety and tangle his hands up in her. He thought of Dottie's laughter when she'd learned to steer her kite.

Slowly, agonizingly, the plane levelled out. Sam's leg gave up its willingness to support his weight. He dug his fingers into the frame to hold himself up and maintained the strength of his Call.

Dottie. Mama. Ruthie. Da. He thought of them and the plane staid its course.

The ground seemed to come out nowhere, too late for Sam to adjust course. He had no time to prepare himself for the crash.

The wing Sam stood inside split off from the rest of the *Lady*. He was thrown into the open. His awareness slammed back into his body as he struck the ground, suddenly cut off from the air surrounding him. The force of the impact blacked him out.

When he came to, he heard Gennaro and Davis calling his name. “Ford! Ford, dammit, where are you? *Sam!*” Searing, agonizing, impossible pain engulfed his legs. The dislodged engine was crushing him, he realized distantly. His crewmates’ seeking voices called his name more frantically. They sounded farther away.

He’d saved his crew, Sam thought. If they were well enough to look for him, they would be okay.

He reached out his mind, but he couldn’t find the wind. Instead, he heard Dottie’s voice, angrily demanding that he promise to come home. He saw Da, standing at the bow with a hand in the ropes, leaning into the wind. He felt Ruthie’s soft hand enclosed in his. Sam closed his eyes against the blue of the sky, dangerous as the sea in a storm.

## HERE TO STAY

The activity in the hospital atrium sang with a cacophony of auras. Afternoon sunlight streamed through the glass front of the building, doctors and visitors strode to and from the escalator, and a chattering line of people looped around the PJ's coffee at the center of the tiled floor, each radiating their own energy into the shifting, discordant blend.

The overload of unfamiliar auras assaulting Tabitha's senses stopped her in her tracks. She'd made a habit of avoiding crowds for exactly this reason.

*Calm and control*, she thought, reaching for the defense mechanism she'd developed first in high school and then as a waitress in the French Quarter. She tried to reduce the sea of auric impressions crashing around her to a mere wash of colors at the edges of her perception.

It had been too long since she'd needed to draw on her control like this. The roiling blend of humanity before her was a nauseating kaleidoscope.

A thin hand wrapped around hers. "Aunt Tabitha? Are you okay?"

Tabitha looked down at Madeleine, who was looking at her like she might be going crazy. Tabitha had zoned out for longer than she had realized.

Among the overwhelming press of unfamiliar auras, her best friend's daughter was comfortably familiar. Madeleine's aura was a burning bush of riotous color, moods rippling red, purple, orange like leaves in a breeze. She was vibrant liveliness disguised as flaming intensity. That afternoon, her aura was shadowed with worry, the shades of violet standing out more than usual.

*Get it together*, Tabitha berated herself. *Cat needs you*. That helped. With another push of effort, she was able to put the overwhelming auras out of focus. They weren't gone, but she could limit their effect.

She squeezed Madeleine's hand and released it. The two of them followed the signs to the emergency room, where Tabitha asked the front desk attendant where they would find Madeleine's mother.

The woman looked bored as she typed the name into her computer. The sharp clack of her artificial nails on the keyboard was torturously slow. "Looks like she's still in surgery. Operating Suite C. There's a family waiting room down the hall."

So they waited.

There were a few other people in the waiting area. An older woman who said her son had been stabbed leaving work, aura churning like the grey-green waves of Lake Pontchartrain. She was a woman worn down by life and the expectation of grief, her dark face tear-streaked. A couple around Tabitha's age dozed restlessly in the stiff-backed chairs, their heads leaned back against the wall and their complementary deep leaf-green and magnolia-soft auras – his speaking of sturdy, earthy wholesomeness, hers of gentleness and quietude – clinging to each other even as they maintained physical distance in sleep. She wondered how long they'd been there, to be able to sleep. Since last night? Had they been called from their bed? Received a phone call like she had by the slivered light of the crescent moon?

Tabitha had been at work when the hospital called to tell her Cat had been in an accident. The man on the phone had tried to be reassuring, but his platitudes fell flat when paired with phrases like "emergency surgery" and "severe internal bleeding." She had retrieved Madeleine, who had just gotten home from school, and headed straight to the hospital.

Madeleine sat beside Tabitha and kicked her feet against the legs of her chair and then against each other, shifting every few minutes into a new position. Her fidgeting drove Tabitha to distraction, frustration ratcheting higher along with her worry.

It had been a long time since Tabitha had sat in a hospital waiting room. The last time had been the day Madeleina was born, and years before that, Cat's son, Grant. Both times, she and Cat had bargained for Tabitha's right to be in the delivery room, but hospital policy was restricted to family only. It didn't matter that Tabitha loved Cat better than anyone who could have laid claim to the title; better than Cat's parents, who had disowned her for getting pregnant out of wedlock, and certainly better than the men who'd left her alone to be a mother.

The wait this time was infinitely harder. This wasn't a birth, something to be celebrated. This was just agonizing over possibilities and praying to a god she didn't even believe in that Cat would be okay when every passing minute suggested the odds weren't in her favor. How much damage had Cat suffered, that she was still in surgery? The thought of her broken and laid open on an operating table ignited panicky fear in Tabitha's chest. The unknowability of her friend's fate beat against her like an urgent pulse.

Madeleina shifted again to kick her feet against the legs of her chair and caught Tabitha's shin on the backswing.

"Could you please just try to sit still, already?" Tabitha snapped.

Madeleina froze in her fidgeting and slowly, slowly, pulled into herself, her shoulders hunching over and fingers tucked into the sleeve hems on her hoodie. "Sorry," she whispered.

Tabitha winced and ground her teeth. She shouldn't be taking her frustration out on the girl. Madeleina was every bit as worried as she was. "I'm sorry, hon. I didn't mean to snap at you like that."

Madeleina nodded but didn't respond. She pulled her feet up onto the seat of the chair and wrapped her arms around her knees, emphasizing her small stature.

Tabitha should be better at this. She'd been halfway to a mother once, years ago, with Grant. She and Cat had both been impossibly young, Cat nineteen and she twenty-two, when he was born, and Cat had had no one else. Tabitha had stepped into the role as the boy's second parent. It was the one way she could express the love she felt for Cat, the love that Cat could only ever return platonically.

Then when he was six years old, Grant had disappeared. They waited months and then years for news that never came. Finally, they were forced to accept the likelihood of his death. By the time Madeleine was born, neither Tabitha nor Cat ever spoke his name. Tabitha surrounded herself with the steady presence of the plants in the greenhouse where she worked instead of the complicated, shifting hues of human life. She'd stopped investing herself in anyone who wasn't Cat. She couldn't face the prospect of pain intrinsic in caring about anyone else.

A doctor came out to speak to the couple who'd been napping. He led them down the hall and away, carrying the stringent smell of hospital cleaning products and a coppery hint of blood with him to match his rusty, worn-out aura.

Tabitha rolled her shoulders and winced. The chairs, intended though they were for long bouts of waiting, were incredibly uncomfortable. Hours had passed since she and Madeleine had arrived.

The leaves-and-magnolia couple trudged back past the waiting room on their way out, hand in hand. Their auras had become dull, almost stagnant, and Tabitha knew that the doctor's news for them hadn't been good.

She looked away from their pain. She didn't want to know. She didn't have room alongside her own quiet desperation for Madeleine's silenced worry, let alone the hurts of strangers.

The waiting room fell back into relative silence, punctuated by occasional soft snuffles as the old woman continued to cry. Farther down the hall, Tabitha could just make out the clipped, efficient tones of the medical staff and squeaky-wheeled equipment moving over the tiled floor. She grimaced and flexed her back again. She was accustomed to being on her feet in the greenhouse, not sitting with nothing to do. The waiting built into agony in more ways than one.

Finally, a surgeon came out, his dusky aura shadowed navy with exhaustion. "Catherine Griffiths?"

Madeleine perked up and dropped her sneaker-clad feet to the floor. "Is Mom going to be okay? Can we see her now?"

The surgeon gave Madeleine a long, tired look, and for a moment Tabitha feared the worst. "She's stable," he said, and Tabitha exhaled her relief. "She's still sleeping off the sedation, but you can visit her." He led them to Cat's recovery room.

Cat's aura was tinged bloody even in unconsciousness. With effort, Tabitha looked through it to the woman everyone else saw. She looked frailer than Tabitha could ever remember seeing her. Where her skin was unmarked, her face was unnaturally pale, but deep bruises ringed her eyes and thick bandages covered portions of her arms. By her bedside, a heartrate monitor showed a jagged, pulsing line. Tabitha took a moment to just watch the monitor, taking comfort in the proof that Cat was alive, that her heart was beating.

Madeleina whimpered and walked to her mother's bedside. Burning bush and bloody sunrise reached out and met each other, as if Cat knew her daughter was there. Tabitha looked on, but let Madeleina have her moment.

Madeleina leaned over and said something to Cat. The surgeon gestured for Tabitha to follow him into the hall.

"Like I said before, she's stable, but it took a lot of doing to get her there," he said. He continued on, providing more details, and only snippets filtered through as Tabitha's attention returned to her friend's hospital bed. Things like "one of her ribs punctured her lung" and "internal hemorrhaging" stood out like the blood-raised marks on Cat's skin, harsh and overwhelming. "She's not out of the woods yet, but we're hopeful."

She answered his explanation with a sound that may have conveyed thanks and wandered in to join Madeleina at Cat's bedside. Madeleina's face was wet with tears.

"She looks awful," Madeleina said. "Why did this happen to her?"

Tabitha sighed. "Sometimes bad things just happen, Maddie. There isn't always a good reason."

A fresh bout of tears overtook the girl. As she fought to breathe through her sobs, Tabitha realized she'd gotten it wrong. She should have said something comforting.

There was one chair in the room, a metal and plastic contraption that looked no more comfortable than the ones in the waiting room, and Tabitha settled heavily into it. Madeleina climbed up onto the bed to sit next to Cat and grabbed her hand.

Tabitha leaned her head back against the wall and listened to the steady beep of the machinery.



She nodded off for a while. When she next looked up, Madeleine had curled up on the bed next to Cat, though there was hardly room for her between her mother's body and the metal rail along the side of the bed. She looked younger than twelve, her arms wrapped around one of her mother's like a younger child might cradle a stuffed animal. Her eyes were open and red-rimmed, staring blankly ahead. No staff must have looked in for a while; they surely would have objected.

Tabitha turned her attention to Cat and inhaled sharply. A purplish shade of grey was seeping into Cat's aura from the edges, sapping color from the sunrise and transforming it to sunset.

*She's dying, Tabitha realized. I'm watching her die.*

She thought of calling out for a doctor, but the heart monitor beeped steadily, showing nothing immediately wrong. Somehow she knew, unequivocally, that there was no way to save Cat. She could only sit there and watch it happen.

No. She couldn't even do that.

She squeezed her eyes shut, holding the image of Cat whole and healthy at the front of her mind, the vibrant sunshine of her aura in happiness. Tabitha's eyes burned and she squeezed them harder, fighting back the urge to cry.

"Come on, hon," Tabitha said, standing. Her voice was rough with unshed tears. "Why don't we go find something to eat and let her rest?" The thought of food turned her stomach.

Madeleine extracted herself from Cat's bed, careful not to jostle her sleeping mother. She hesitated in the doorway and looked back. To her, Cat would look no different.

The hospital's hallways were dim and muted, the monotonous white walls and floors a labyrinth of sameness. Only a handful of staff made their way through the halls, their practical shoes quiet on the hard tile. The hospital itself seemed to doze in recognition of the late hour.

Tabitha followed the signs back to the atrium. There was no line at the coffee shop, just a barista leaning against the counter with a pair of headphones looped around his neck. Tabitha ordered an Earl Gray tea for herself and a hot chocolate for Madeleine. She had no desire to eat, but Madeleine didn't seem inclined to pick anything either, so Tabitha selected a fruit cup, a sandwich, and a chocolate croissant from the display case.

They sat at a table to eat. Tabitha's tea scalded her tongue, but she kept sipping from it. Her mind ticked off moments like a clock. She wondered how many would pass before Cat would be gone for good. She didn't bother to unwrap the sandwich.

Madeleine picked at the croissant, peeling apart the flaky layers. The vibrant shades of her aura were muted, as dim as the half-lit atrium. "Mom's going to be okay, right?"

Tabitha wished more than anything that she could give that reassurance. Grief and dread settled achingly in her chest. "I don't know," she lied. "We just have to hope for the best."

The torch she'd once carried for Cat had long ago burnt down to hearth-embers, but the love, though transformed, was as deep and strong as ever. She felt torn asunder, raw, as though she were bleeding out in her own way. That purple-grey sunset was imprinted at the front of her mind, however much she wanted to forget.

When she couldn't prolong the inevitable anymore, Tabitha led Madeleine back upstairs to the recovery ward.

A new doctor intercepted them before they reached Cat's room, this one's aura a jaded brush of sage. Even knowing what was coming, his words struck Tabitha like a physical blow. Her breath escaped in a whoosh. She closed her eyes as she absorbed the pain of certainty.

Madeleina launched herself into Tabitha's arms with a sharp cry. Her thin arms were surprisingly strong as they locked around Tabitha's ribs. Tabitha wrapped her arms around her shoulders in an awkward approximation of comfort. She didn't have much in the way of softness to give. Tabitha's femininity had faded with her once-vibrant red hair, and the hints of curves she had once held had been hardened into angles and edges by grief and isolation. Dirt crusted her nails and the creases of her flannel shirt.

Madeleina burrowed deeper into Tabitha's arms and didn't seem to care about any of that. After a few minutes, the girl's grip and her tears became stifling, and Tabitha pulled herself away from her embrace.

With nothing else to do with her, Tabitha took Madeleina home. There was no one else to take Madeleina; Cat had no siblings, no other family, and even the parents who'd abandoned her so long ago were gone now. She would have to wait until tomorrow to figure out what to do with the girl.

Her house wasn't set up to take care of a child, even one half-grown like Madeleina. Tabitha made up the bed in the guest room and found an old T-shirt for her to sleep in. As tiny as she was, Tabitha's shirt fit like a nightgown, falling nearly to her knees.

Tabitha sat with her long into the dark of early morning. She recalled a night, almost two decades past, when she had sat by Grant's bedside and told him stories to ward off his nightmares. Madeleina looked nothing like Tabitha's boy, whose half-Native heritage had given him brown skin and dark hair. Only their eyes were alike; pale hazel-green, like Cat's eyes.

Cat's absence clawed at her chest, and Tabitha wanted nothing more than to be alone in her grief. She resented Madeleine's stricken response, though she knew it was unfair. Cat was all Madeleine had, but she'd been all Tabitha had, too. She'd been Tabitha's for longer, even, for a decade before Madeleine had been born.

Eventually, Madeleine's exhaustion overtook her, and Tabitha wandered back out into the house. Each room reminded her of Cat. They had never lived together there, but there was the painting on the wall that Cat had bought from one of the painters by Jackson Square, insisting that Tabitha's house needed more color - "plants don't count as color, Tabitha!" - and the dining table where they'd talked over tea about the men Cat invited into her bed but never fully into her life, and the half-drunk bottle of Scotch on the counter that they'd opened on Tabitha's last birthday. The touches Cat had left on the house were everywhere.

A few drinks into that bottle of Scotch, Cat had pushed her glass aside and run both hands through her long blonde hair, as soft and lush as it had been twenty years before. Time hadn't succeeded in diminishing Cat's beauty, although like Tabitha, she had been permanently changed by losing Grant. Her physical grace remained, and her aura had still sung with the pink and orange hues of a sunrise, but she had lost some of her glow, as if perpetually trapped in the moments before the sun broke over the horizon.

"I just feel like I'm not doing enough," Cat had said desperately.

It had taken Tabitha a moment to catch up with the new train of thought. Cat worried over the lack of a man in her life, not for her own sake, but for Madeleine's. She worried that growing up without a father meant Madeleine was missing out on something critical.

Tabitha had reached across the table and taken Cat's hands in her own, gently disentangling them from her hair. "Honey, that girl isn't missing out on anything. She's got a

mom who loves her twice as much as any father could have done.” Cat would be devastated at the realization that her daughter would have to grow up without a mother now, too.

She would be counting on Tabitha to step up if she couldn’t be there herself. It would be selfish of Tabitha to refuse her that.

When the need had arisen, Cat had managed to fit herself back into the role of a mother, to be there for Madeleine. Maybe now it was time for Tabitha to do the same, to step into the role Cat would want her to take. She could find a way to be what Madeleine needed.

Knowing she wouldn’t be able to rest, Tabitha brewed a cup of tea and went to stand on her porch. Early morning light was just beginning to seep over the roofs of the neighboring houses, staining the horizon with shades of pink and gold. As she watched the sunrise, she finally allowed herself to cry.

## LIVING WITH THE DEAD

There was a woman outside the front door of my shop. That wouldn't be unusual, except that it was 9:45, and I wasn't scheduled to open for another fifteen minutes. It was still early for business in the French Quarter. The tourists are usually sleeping off their hangovers for a while yet, and most locals don't frequent shops like mine.

I paused at the side door under the pretense of searching my bag for something and examined my visitor more closely. Her crisply pressed, pin-striped blouse and neatly pinned red hair looked out of place in front of my dingy brick shopfront. I peered closely, looking for any sign that she was a customer of the non-living variety. No such luck. She was too far away to see the slightly smudged-around-the-edges look that spoke of incorporeality, and there was no one else on the street to give her away by too casually ignoring her presence.

I couldn't learn anything else from a distance, so I unlocked the door and went inside. The first order of business was to costume myself with the persona of the "dreamy mystic" that I pulled over myself for the customers' benefit. People come into a Dumaine Street spiritualist's den with certain expectations; I learned early that it was good for business to live up to them. So however much I hated the brightly patterned layers and jewelry, I took the time every morning to adorn my neck and wrists with amulets and bangles, to tie a scarf around my unruly hair, and to drape a shawl around my shoulders. Without the baubles, I looked like any other thirty-something Creole woman in a city full of them. With them, I took on an appearance of mystique.

It didn't matter that I could actually speak to the dead. My job was one part spiritualism to three parts showmanship.

I closed up my tiny, paper-strewn office and unlocked the front door. The woman waiting on the sidewalk jerked it open and swept inside. Definitely corporeal, then.

That was good. I might make my living off of ghosts, but they weren't exactly paying customers.

"Good morning," I said, affecting the smoky voice I used on my clientele. One more part of my act. "What can the Lady Jessamine do for you today?"

The woman crossed her arms and examined me coldly. Her mouth pinched in disapproval. Up close, she looked slightly less tailored. Her blouse was wilting in the late July humidity and flyaway hairs escaped her barrette, framing her face in a halo of coppery wisps.

Call me crazy, but I don't like being stared at like some kind of freak. Rather than stand up to her continued scrutiny, I turned my back on her and went behind the register to begin my usual opening routine. I kept several pillar candles on a shelf overhead, and I pulled them down to light them one at a time.

"I sense that you are conflicted," I said. It was an easy assumption. The longer she watched me, the tighter the lines of tension in her body grew. "I sense that you are driven by desperation, but you have doubts. You wonder if you have made the right choice by coming to me today."

I'll let you in on a little secret: just because I'm the real deal doesn't mean I'm not faking it most of the time.

A lot of what I do is a blend of cold and warm reading. I might be able to see ghosts, but they're rarely available when they'd actually be useful. I've built my reputation by occasionally demonstrating true communication with the dead, but I handle my day-to-day business the same way as most self-proclaimed psychics and mediums: through the ability to make good guesses

and spin attractive lies. My customers think I have a direct line to the afterlife. What I've really got is a pretty good line on what makes people tick.

I took the few steps back toward the front door. My shop is small, but I do what I can to maximize the space. My front display table advertised to passersby exactly what type of magic could be found inside. While I waited for the woman to respond, I lit the incense I kept in an antique brass holder between a leather-bound copy of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and a pair of decorative skulls.

"My son believes that our house is haunted," the woman said finally.

I blew gently on the stick of incense I'd just lit. Her statement hung between us with the fragrant smoke while I formulated a response.

"You are worried for him." Another obvious, vague observation. The trick is to seem insightful while guiding the customer to provide more details.

"We just moved to the city last month. Our first night in our house, Matthew came to my room and said that the woman who lived there before us was still there. The realtor says no one has ever died in that house. They're required to tell you, you know. But Matthew won't believe it, no matter what we say."

Aha. "You were hoping I could make contact with this woman and discover what has tied her to your home," I said.

The woman scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. Lady Jessamine, you and I both know that what you do here is nothing more than a hoax. I want you to convince my son that his ghost is gone. Do a séance; perform an exorcism; I don't really care. Just make him believe that our house is safe."



That caught me off guard. Don't get me wrong, I get plenty of skeptics in my shop. Most of them are secretly looking for proof of something that a hundred years of modern science and nationally reinforced atheism have taught them isn't there. I can understand that; I used to think the same thing.

My family is deeply spiritual. I grew up hearing stories about my mother's grandmother, who was struck by lightning and gifted the power to speak with the voices of the dead. I always figured it was just a bunch of Haitian nonsense. My lifelong struggle with cardiomyopathy made me wary of religion and of anyone claiming to have powers from beyond. I had watched too many friends from the hospital turn to alternative treatments or the solace of an uncaring god when modern medicine couldn't provide miracles, and I had attended a lot of their funerals.

Then when I was twenty-two, I had a heart transplant. I woke up in the recovery room with a nifty scar bisecting my chest, the bone-deep pain of having my sternum cracked open, and the ability to see the dead who still walk the world. Whatever power my great-grandmother had had lain dormant in my blood, and something in that operating room brought it out. Just like the lightning.

That said, I'd never had a customer actually *ask* me to lie. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. What was the point of putting on a show for a customer who knew that was all it was? And to deceive a kid went beyond the usual scope of my work.

More likely than not, the woman's house really wasn't haunted. Most "haunted houses" that I've seen have been a result of old pipes, faulty wiring, and overactive imaginations. If the neighborhood kids had been regaling the woman's son with the local ghost stories, it would certainly explain his conviction that their house had a spectral pest.

But living with the dead could be taxing and traumatizing; if I could put Matthew at ease in his own home, the lie might be a kindness.

“When would you like for me to come?” I asked.

\* \* \* \* \*

Despite the realtor’s assurances that the family’s house had never seen a death, I never walk into a job without doing my due diligence. New Orleans has its fair share of nasty ghosts. Just because they can’t do physical damage doesn’t mean that some of them haven’t had a couple centuries to learn how to leave a mark. Nightmares come part and parcel with my gig. I suspect they would even if I didn’t seek out the dead as a part of my day job.

The night before I was scheduled to visit, I settled into my squashy, solitary couch with a glass of wine and my laptop to dig up anything Google had to offer on the woman’s family or their house.

I started with the family. The woman had given her name as Elaine Marx. It didn’t take long to find her husband’s name and search both sides of the family for strange occurrences or recent deaths. My search came up empty. By all accounts, the Marxes were perfectly normal. Stanley Marx was a corporate attorney of middling status at his firm, had a graying, receding hairline, and played golf on the weekends. Elaine was on the board of several small charities. She posted lots of pictures of brunches and coffee meetings with other wives of wealthy men to Facebook.

I moved on to the house next. Google didn’t turn up any local legends in the few blocks around Elaine’s home. Neither were there any peculiar deaths or obituaries going as far back as the records were available online.

All of that meant that when I pulled up in front of the Marxes' address in the Garden District on Saturday morning, I was fairly convinced that I would be doing exactly what Elaine had requested: convincing a distressed young boy that his house did not, in fact, contain a ghost.

In any other neighborhood, the Marxes' prim, powder blue Victorian home would have been stunning. In this part of town, noted for its lush, ornate architecture, it looked modest, instead. Beside the next-door neighbor's pristine white Greek Revival, the Victorian house's gingerbread trim and small, second-floor balcony were merely quaint. The large bay windows that looked into the Marxes' front parlor and overlooked their flowering front bushes were drool-worthy, though. My apartment had one small window in the living room and none in the bedroom. I lived most of my days by artificial light.

My shawl and colorful skirts looked as out of place as my beat-up Honda as I walked up to ring the doorbell. I was sweating in my layers, and my hair clung uncomfortably to the back of my neck.

A chill burst of air conditioning washed over me when Elaine opened the front door. I held back an unprofessional moan of relief.

"Lady Jessamine," Elaine said. "Thank you for coming." She didn't sound grateful at all. She had her copper hair contained in a flawless French twist, and her blue blouse set off her ivory complexion beautifully. I had to resist the urge to touch my own kinky tangle of curls. A trickle of sweat slid down between my breasts while I waited for her to invite me inside.

"You are having second thoughts about having me here," I observed. "You need not worry. I will do what I can to help your son."

Elaine's mouth pressed into a thin line, but she stepped back to allow me past the threshold. "I didn't tell my husband you were coming," she said. "He wouldn't approve. But Matthew is getting more out of hand, and something must be done."

'Out of hand' didn't sound like something a concerned parent would say. It sounded more like she was inconvenienced by his misbehavior.

She led me into the sitting room I'd seen through the front windows. Airy, fresh, and decorated with pale florals and shades of yellow, it was the kind of room you'd find in the pages of a home decorating magazine, the kind that made ordinary housewives despair over their own lived-in spaces.

It would have been picture perfect, if not for the ghost in the armchair.

Presented with an actual spirit, I fell into the habits and rhythms of my job. "I sense a strong presence in this space. Perhaps your Matthew's assessment of this place was not wrong."

I'd forgotten the strength of Elaine's skepticism. She rounded on me with flinty anger in her eyes. "I will *not* be conned, so don't waste my time with cheap tricks and petty lies."

"My apologies," I demurred, bowing my head. "I meant no offense to you or yours."

The ghost turned to look at me. "Oh good," she said. She was an elderly woman in a dress maybe forty years out of date, a faded floral style that buttoned down the front. "Maybe you can explain to that poor child that I don't mean him any harm." She turned back to looking out the window.

As clearly as I can see the ghosts around me, they've always been able to tell what I am, even if I pretend not to see them. They're usually pretty intense about it. After who knows how many years of isolation, even the calmest ghost is delighted to meet someone they can talk to. I'd never encountered such a casual response to my presence.

“Mom!” a boy called from somewhere in the house. His voice was accompanied by the smacking sound of running feet on the hardwood floors. “Who are you tal –?” He ran into the room and froze midsentence. His gaze locked on the old woman in the armchair.

He was older than I would have expected, maybe nine or ten, with the same vividly red hair as his mother. And he could unmistakably see the ghost in the room with us.

Outside of my family’s stories, I’d never met another person like me. I’d gone looking before I’d opened my shop. When I had first figured out what was happening to me, I was desperate for guidance. I tried every shop in New Orleans proper and several out in the bayou, everyone who claimed to have a link to the beyond, and all I’d discovered was a hoard of fakes. A handful had actual ghosts in residence, but each store’s proprietor was as oblivious as the last. By the time I’d finished, I’d become resigned to the fact that if there were other people out there like me, they weren’t inclined to advertise it.

“Matthew, this is Lady Jessamine. She’s –” Elaine stopped, apparently unsure about how to explain my purpose in their home. She was definitely having second thoughts.

“I am here to see about your ghost,” I told him. I dropped some of my mystical façade and spoke to him in my normal voice.

His mouth opened in surprise, and he looked between me and his mother. His gaze flitted back to the old woman’s ghost, and then he met my eyes. “Can you see her too?”

Elaine gave me a hard, cautious look. She wanted me to lie. My whole reason for being here was to lie; it had been from the start. But I’d come here thinking that the boy was imagining things. My original purpose became obsolete in the face of a gift like my own. Lying wouldn’t help Matthew.

“Yes,” I told him simply.

Matthew exhaled with relief, and his shoulders relaxed.

I realized I was almost certainly the first adult who had believed him. His mother, his father, and anyone else he had told would have insisted he was imagining it. He didn't have the tools to protect himself from their dismissals.

I wear my gift like a shield and have since I discovered it. I've accepted the skeptics as an inevitable part of my job, and I let the outward projection of the mystic that people expect to see protect my truth. I know that the people who assume that I'm a con artist or a nutcase don't really know *me*. Matthew's skeptics were the people meant to protect and cherish him.

Even with a family as open to the otherworldly as mine, I've never told my parents about my second sight. I know I couldn't handle it if they didn't believe me, so I let them think what everyone else does, that my shop is just my way of using my heritage to make a living. And Matthew was facing his parents' rejection as a child.

"What's going on here?" Stanley Marx stood in the doorway. His stare was hard and pinned me in place; I imagined it served him well in court.

"Lady Jessamine says she can see the ghost too," Matthew said. There was something defiant in the way he raised his chin and faced his father.

"What?" Stanley's voice was flat with fury.

"I thought she could help," Elaine said. "Stan —"

"Out," Stanley said, his voice brittle and cold. "Get out of my house."

I wanted to argue. I wanted to rail and rage and tell these people that they were breaking their son by denying him acceptance. But it wouldn't do any good, and it wouldn't help Matthew.

I heard the old woman heave a sorrowful sigh as I turned my back and left. The sound of the Marxes arguing followed me out of the house.

\* \* \* \* \*

“It sounds like you need to talk to the boy alone,” my friend Alison said thoughtfully.

Alison is the one person I can go to when I’ve got otherworldly issues to sort out. She’s known me since college, when I believed the explanations for everything in life could be found in formulas and theorems, and she’s the only friend who stuck by me when my cardiomyopathy almost killed me. She was also the one who’d walked in on me talking to thin air and accepted my explanation without batting an eye.

Alison is good people.

I’d been at a total loss for what to do next after I’d driven home from the Marxes’ that afternoon, so I’d traded in my costume for a comfortable pair of leggings and an old college T-shirt and asked Alison to meet me for drinks.

I took a sip of my margarita and savored the pucker of lime and salt before I responded. “Easier said than done. No way are they letting me anywhere near him again.”

Alison shrugged. “So don’t ask for permission.”

I snorted. “He’s a lawyer. If they find out I went behind their backs, I’ll get arrested or sued for harassment.”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t be smart about it, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this invested in your job.” She frowned at me over her vodka soda. “You’re really worried about this kid.”

“He’s like me,” I said. I didn’t have a better way to explain it to her. “I just – I’ve never *met* anyone like me before.” It felt surreal, saying it out loud. I’d given up ever finding another person who shared in my ability.

She watched me over the rim of her drink and waited patiently.

I sighed. “He doesn’t know how to cope. There’s a ghost in his house. He’s living with her, and he doesn’t know not to be afraid, and – Jesus, Al, you should have seen the way his parents looked at him.”

“So it’s like I said. You need to talk to him. You can’t do it with his mom around.”

Alison shrugged again. “You’re smart and you’re motivated. You’ll figure it out.”

I still didn’t have a plan when I left the bar that night, but I didn’t feel as guilty about the whole situation. Alison was good like that.

I spent the next few days stalking Elaine Marx’s social media feeds, stocking up information in the hopes that something would click. I figured if she was even half a proud parent – or at least wanted the appearance of one, since Elaine seemed to be all about status – she would have a post or two about her kid’s extracurriculars. Matthew turned out to be the least involved rich kid ever. As far as I could tell, he woke up, went to school, and came home every day without exception.

Poor kid.

My opportunity came the following weekend. I checked my phone just minutes after Elaine posted a picture with her husband at some fancy luncheon. A few more clicks told me it was scheduled to go on for at least another couple of hours. I wrapped up a pricey sale of hand-painted tarot cards done by a local artist, ushered two browsing customers with the noncommittal posture of window-shoppers gently but firmly out the door, and closed up my shop for the rest of



the day. Closing early two Saturdays in a row wouldn't do wonders for my business, but there was no telling when I'd get another chance to see Matthew with both of his parents out of the way.

I removed most of my costume before I drove down to the house. I kept my loose peasant blouse – mostly because I didn't have another shirt to change into – but I traded my skirts for a pair of cut-off shorts and left my jewelry in the office. I wouldn't be playing the part of the Lady Jessamine for Matthew. For this, I just needed to be Jess Dupre.

I strode up the front walk with as much confidence as I could muster and rang the doorbell. Shuffling footsteps approached and I heard the peephole click.

The door opened. A blonde teenager in an LSU T-shirt stood on the other side. She gave me the withering, unimpressed look mastered by sixteen-year-olds the world over and said, "Who are you?"

I'd forgotten to account for Matthew needing a babysitter. If I turned back now, she'd still tell Elaine about my visit when she got back. In for a penny, I guess.

"I'm a friend of Elaine's," I lied. "Is Matthew home?"

The girl raised an eyebrow at me. I guess I didn't look like someone who Elaine Marx, of the perfect hair and Sunday brunch bunch, would bother to befriend. After a moment, she turned and called over her shoulder. "Yo, Matt! There's some lady here to see you."

If it wouldn't mean exposing my lie, I would have warned the girl against letting strangers through the door. Believing that all home invaders took the form of big, scary men toting guns was the kind of misconception that could get her into serious trouble someday. I might not mean any harm, but that didn't make me a welcome visitor in the Marxes' home.

Matthew came sullenly into the hall but perked up when he saw me. “I know you.” He obviously hadn’t expected to see me again.

That was good enough for the teenager. She wandered back down the hall toward a part of the house I hadn’t seen on my first visit.

“Mom said you were a liar.” Matthew frowned cautiously at me. He had more sense than the sixteen-year-old babysitter. Geez. “But you said you can see the ghost, and Mom thinks I’m a liar too.”

My heart broke a little more for the kid.

“Your mom can’t see her,” I said gently. “She doesn’t understand what she doesn’t see. I used to be like that too.”

I could sympathize with Elaine’s perception of the world. It was easier to believe that the sum of life was what you could see with your own eyes. I could *not* sympathize with her treatment of her son.

“How come you and I can see her but my mom and dad can’t? Is there something wrong with us?”

“No, honey, there’s nothing wrong with us. I had a really big operation, and that was when I started to see.” I paused. If my great-grandmother and I had both had to undergo life-altering experiences before we could perceive the afterlife, did that mean Matthew had, too? What kind of trauma would be required to bring this on a nine-year-old boy? “Did something like that happen to you?”

Matthew shook his head. “The ghosts have always been there. When I was little, I think Mom thought it was like the imaginary friends that other kids had. She didn’t get why I was so

afraid of them, but she didn't think it was bad. Only now we're living with one, and I had to explain it to her right. She doesn't get it. I can't live here. Not with *her*."

"Always?" I asked, hung up on the first part of what he'd said.

Matthew nodded.

I don't know why I was surprised. There was no reason to believe that all mediums were like the ones in my family. I was working with a negligible sample size, after all. Maybe my great-grandmother and I were the outliers.

But then I focused on the rest of his words. "What have the ghosts done that made you afraid? Did the ghost here do something to you?"

"They're... they always *ask* me for things, and I don't understand. Once they realize I can see them, they won't leave me alone. And sometimes... sometimes they say someone else hurt *them*, or there's someone they want to hurt, and...." He ducked his head and whispered the rest. "They get so mad sometimes."

I sighed. No wonder the kid was scared. I'd learned how to deal with the murder victims and murderers who came looking for my aid. But Matthew couldn't help them even if he wanted to. Why would they even ask something like that of a kid? "And the woman in your house?"

"I try to stay away," he said. "She tries to talk to me sometimes, but she doesn't come into my room if I'm there, so I stay where she can't get to me."

Trapped in his own house. "Matthew," I said. "I know you don't know me very well, but I want to do something. I want us to go and talk to the ghost who lives here with you."

His eyes snapped up to meet mine. "What? Why?" he asked.

"I think maybe it would help you if you knew what she has to say."

He shook his head frantically. "I can't."

“What if I went in first, to make sure she won’t do anything bad?”

His face squinched up as he pondered that for a moment. “I... guess that would be okay.”

I left him waiting in the hallway and went into the sitting room. The ghost was in the same chair where she’d been on my last visit. “Excuse me,” I said.

She turned, and her face lit in a smile. “I didn’t think you’d come back.”

“I wasn’t sure I would either,” I admitted.

“I hope you can do something to help that boy,” she said. “He’s been so frightened ever since he came here, and he won’t let me close enough to explain anything.”

“About that,” I said. “Was there something you were looking for help with? He’s too young, but I might be able to help.” I was hesitant to make an open-ended offer. Depending on how long ago she’d died, her unfinished business may be out of my reach. Even if her death was recent, plenty of ghosts had unpleasant or impossible requests.

“Oh no, dear, nothing like that. I was really just looking for a little conversation. It gets quiet, you know, being stuck here on my own.” Longing etched itself into the lines of her face, and she glanced out the window again.

“I’m sure it does,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

I went back to get Matthew. “Come on,” I said. “She can’t hurt you and she won’t ask you for anything. I just want you two to say hello.”

I offered him my hand, and to my surprise, he took it. By nine, my younger brothers had both been firmly independent and refused to hold anyone’s hand, even to cross the road.

Matthew’s thin hand slid comfortably into mine.

In the sitting room, Matthew stayed a step behind me, partially obscured from the old woman’s view. I tugged gently on his hand, encouraging him to come forward.

“It seems like you two may have gotten off to a bad start,” I said. “My name is Jess. This is Matthew. Could you maybe tell us a little about yourself?”

“When I lived here, my name was Antonia March,” the woman told us. “I’d leave if I could, but I haven’t been able to pass beyond these walls since my son moved out twenty years ago.”

I’ve met a lot of ghosts in the past ten years, and one of the first things I learned was that they don’t all follow the same rules. Some are trapped by places, some connected to people or objects, and some don’t seem to have any restrictions at all on where they go. The nearest I can figure is that they’re bound by the rules they expect to bind them. If the woman *thought* she couldn’t leave, then she was likely to be right.

The afterlife is weird, but that bit doesn’t strike me as much different from the things that hold people back in this life sometimes.

“This is the place where you died?” I asked. I had been pretty sure that it wasn’t. I’d followed up my preliminary search with a more thorough one after I’d seen her in the Marxes’ house, and there still wasn’t any sign that a death had occurred within these walls.

“Oh, no, I died in the retirement home where my Jason put me at the end of my days. This was his house, for a time. I lived here with him before my memory went, and after my body gave up, I found myself here again. I was so happy to be back with my family, but once he moved and I learned that I couldn’t, well... it’s been a long twenty years.”

Twenty years with no one to talk to, and the first person she’d met who could see her was a kid. He was lucky she hadn’t been more desperate for contact. With that knowledge, I was even more amazed by her calm acknowledgement the first time she’d seen me.

“How did you die?” Matthew asked.

I grimaced. That was one question I *never* asked. At best it could be offensive, and at worst, traumatizing. I'd had a few genuine consultations in my shop go south when my customers insisted I get the answer to that one.

"Oh, it was just my time, dear," she said. "My husband went three years before I did. I thought I would go to see him when I died, but instead, I wound up here. I hope he's where he belongs and not trapped in some other house somewhere hoping the same for me."

I didn't offer a response to that. I don't pretend to know what happens to the dead who aren't trapped on the same plane as the living. All I know is that they aren't all here, or the city would be swarming with the dead.

"You must get really lonely," Matthew said, stepping a little farther forward.

Antonia was about the best gateway ghost a new spiritualist could hope for. She was calm and friendly, and her grandmotherly appearance wouldn't exactly strike fear into the hearts of men. She was more likely to inspire an urge to help her with her groceries.

"Sometimes," Antonia said.

I took a step back from the two of them. Matthew wasn't relying on my shelter anymore. That was good.

"Matthew," I said, needing to impart the one bit of wisdom that would carry him through. He turned to look at me. "Now that you know she doesn't mean to bother you, you can't keep trying to tell your parents about Antonia."

He scowled, but Antonia spoke up in immediate agreement. She leaned forward in her chair, and I could see the play of sunlight across the upholstery, passing through her as if she wasn't there. "You're very special," she said. "Most people can't sense me, and that's how it's meant to be. It's not safe for people to know."

“But my mom thinks I’m a liar.”

“I know,” I said. I sat down on the floor, putting myself on a level with him. This was the most important thing for Matthew to understand. The world would tear him to pieces if he continued to be honest about what he was. “Most people think I’m a liar too. But in this case – just this once – don’t you think it’s better to lie so your mom thinks you’re telling the truth, instead of telling the truth that gets you in trouble?”

He scowled as he tried to work out the moral riddle I’d just offered.

“You’re different, and sometimes people think different is dangerous, or wrong,” I said. “They won’t understand how special you are. The best way we have to protect ourselves is to hide it from people.”

“But you don’t hide it.”

I grinned. “Sure I do. Your mom said I was a liar too, remember?”

His frown turned pensive. “Huh.”

“It won’t be easy,” I warned, “but the longer you pretend that you can’t see them, the easier it gets.”

“But do I really have to pretend I can’t see Ms. Antonia?” All of his former concerns about her presence had apparently been dispelled by their brief interaction.

“How about you pretend when your parents are here?” I suggested. “Otherwise, it’s up to you. She won’t talk to you unless you talk to her first.”

I glanced at the ghost. She inclined her head in agreement.

He looked up at her, and then back at me. “Yeah. Okay.”

It was getting close to the time the Marxes would be returning from their luncheon. Right now, I thought, Matthew could learn more by speaking to Antonia than by talking to me anyway. I gave him my card and left him in conversation with the ghost.

I could teach him more when he was ready.



## SAFE

Natasha steps off the train feeling as wired as if she'd drunk three espressos in a row without food. Her fingers clench around the strap of her bag to stave off the jitters. She doesn't want her paranoia to wake the baby on her hip.

The 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station is cavernous, and the clamor of arriving and departing trains, the tinny, grating voices over the loudspeakers, and the rushing, shouting, muttering voices of passengers in conversation all echo in a deafening press around her. The scents of human sweat and frying food and burnt coffee, rusting metal and stale urine and kenneled pets crowd her sensitive nose. The senses that usually protect her are useless in the overstimulation of the station.

She has heard Americans use a term, "nose blind," and she wishes, for a moment, that that is what she could be. The sensory overload is so intense that she can't think, and she cannot afford not to think. She must hold herself together, for Lukas's sake.

Rather than take Lukas out into the winter cold, however much she wants to escape the station, Natasha finds a bench where she can place her back against the wall. She chooses the seat Laurent would choose: a place where she can see the entire station in one sweep, where no one can sneak up on her. When she is with Laurent, she must always take the vulnerable seat, with her back to the room. If she questioned that – and she has not, for a very long time – he would turn the question back on her: did she not trust him to protect her?

Natasha cradles Lukas in her arms and strokes gentle fingers over the bruise blossoming around Lukas's pudgy, fragile arm. She had never trusted Laurent to protect her. She had

pretended that it didn't matter. But now she cannot trust him to protect their baby, either, and that she cannot bear.

Natasha is a bad mate. She knows this; has known this for years. Laurent made sure she knew, and so when they fight, she deserves it. And her lynx can fight back against his lynx, which makes it almost even, although his Shifted form is larger than hers.

Lukas is innocent. He is not a bad child. He does not deserve the force of Laurent's anger.

She pulls out her old-fashioned flip phone, the one form of communication Laurent allowed her so she could speak to her family back in Romania, and checks her voicemails. She has five. Four are from Laurent, and she deletes them without listening. She is too afraid to hear the rage in his voice. The fifth is the one she is waiting for.

Relief and comforting familiarity wash over her at the sound of Jessica's recorded voice. "Tasha, it is so good to hear from you. I can't believe you're finally getting away from that French fuckhead! I wish I could help, but I'm in Phoenix till next week. But we should definitely catch up when I get back!"

The comfort is gone as quickly as it arrived. Jessica can't help. Natasha is alone.

She was counting on Jessica. All of Natasha's family and friends live in Romania. She followed Laurent and his shiny American job to Boston, back when things were good more often than not and their fights led to languorous, gentle lovemaking instead of the reckless, angry sex they turned to later, the kind that led to Lukas. Jessica lived in the apartment across the hall, and while she was two years younger than Natasha, she was wiser to the ways of the foreign city and took Natasha under her wing. She'd despised Laurent from the start.

When Natasha came home from the store the night before to find Lukas squalling in pain and terror and Laurent screaming at him in return, Jessica was the first person she thought of.

Jessica would know what to do; she would help Natasha keep Lukas safe.

Without Jessica, she has no one. She has no driver's license, no working permit, no plan. Nothing but her passport and her baby's and the growing panic in her chest.

Sobs break free of the panic, and Natasha clutches Lukas more firmly against herself. She does not know how to keep him safe in this country. She is not just a bad mate; she is a bad mother.

\* \* \* \* \*

Belinda is dead on her feet. Her duffel bag feels like it has been stuffed with cinderblocks instead of neatly rolled clothes, and she debates extending her trip to bed down in a Philadelphia hotel rather than drive the five hours back home tonight. Her brother Nick keeps complaining about how quiet his house is since Sam moved out; he wouldn't mind having her kids for another night. If nothing else, it'll make him appreciate the quiet when they're back under her roof.

A rapid succession of text messages sets off a stuttering string of vibrations in her pocket. She steps out of the way of the thronging passengers to check them. Her oldest son, Marshall, wants permission to order pizza with the emergency credit card. She rolls her eyes and responds in the negative. *Have Uncle Nick bring you pizza from the diner.*

Marshall sends back a disgusted emoji. *Uncle Nicks pizza sux.*

*Pizza is not an emergency. Uncle Nick has plenty of food.* Still, she'd pass along Marshall's critique. Nick believes that the kids' unfiltered opinions make them the best food critics in town. They don't hold back.

She stuffs her phone back in her pocket with a sigh. Best not leave the kids with Nick another night after all.

She turns in the direction of the parking garage and then stops at the sound of a watery lullaby punctuated by sniffling sobs. On a nearby bench, a young woman in a puffy down coat is rocking an infant in her arms, singing quietly in a language Belinda can't quite identify. Tears streak her face, and the yellowish-green remnants of a bruise highlight one round cheek. On closer inspection, Belinda can see the angry, red-purple impression of fingers on the baby's arm. She's seen a hundred iterations of those injuries in the back of her ambulance. She knows where bruises like that come from.

She has to swallow the anger tightening her throat before she approaches. This is a woman who has been taught fear and pain; she won't respond well to more anger.

"Excuse me," Belinda says.

The woman doesn't notice her at first. When she does, her wide brown eyes are bloodshot and hopeless.

"Excuse me," Belinda says again, "is there anything I can do to help you? Would you like me to look at your baby? I have medical training." Unless the baby's arm is broken, which it doesn't look to be, there isn't much Belinda can do, but that isn't why she offers. To a distraught parent, someone to take their child's injury seriously can be the equivalent of kissing a booboo better.

"You can help us?" the woman says. She curves her body protectively around her baby and eyes Belinda warily.

Belinda sits on the long bench, keeping a few body-widths between them. "May I take a look?" She holds out her hands, palms up: offering without reaching to take.

The woman's jaw and eyebrows work as she considers her options. She just stares at Belinda for a while, apparently unable to make up her mind. Trust would be hard to come by.

"What's his name?" Belinda asks.

"Lukas. After his grandfather."

The woman's inflection is rounded and musical. European, Belinda thinks. Small town life hasn't given her the experience to identify it more specifically.

"That's lovely," Belinda says. "Lukas." She keeps her voice soft and gentle, like her brother's Pack leader, Will, does with the animals he raises. It takes a soft touch for a wolf to raise horses and sheep, and that same tender approach is needed here if she doesn't want to spook the woman into fleeing or clamming up against her offered aid.

The baby gurgles and turns his head to look at her with guileless blue eyes.

The woman whines softly, a desperate sound, and strokes the wispy blonde hair on his forehead. "You can help him?" she asks again.

Belinda nods.

The woman slides closer on the bench and holds Lukas out to her. She seems reluctant to part with him, barely extending her arms away from her body.

Belinda takes him carefully. Muscle memory carries him against her chest, where she cradles his head and body in the crook of her arm. Her youngest is ten, but this part of motherhood is like riding a bike.

She begins to turn, so she is seated more stably on the bench, and freezes at the inhuman snarl that tears from the woman's throat. It is a purely instinctual sound, the reaction of an animal separated from her young.

Well. *Well*. This just became a thousand times more complicated. Though it wasn't her intention before, Belinda knows that she will not be able to walk away from this mother and child and leave them to fend in their flight from their abuser.

She may not be a Shifter herself, but through Nick and through her children, she is still of the Pack, and her Pack does not *ever* leave a Shifter in need. The sudden need to be certain this woman and her baby remain safe is as close to the compulsion of instinct as Belinda has ever felt.

"Okay," Belinda says, quiet and calm. A misstep could be very dangerous for her. "It's okay. Here." Slowly, slowly, she turns toward the young woman, offering Lukas back to her.

The woman is trembling and her eyes are lighter than they were a moment ago, closer to gold than brown, and the whites have all but vanished. She squeezes her hands into fists and takes a long, deep breath with her head tilted back.

"No," she says. "No. Please."

As Belinda watches, her eyes darken back to their human shade.

"Okay," Belinda says. This time she doesn't turn away from the woman. Instead, she unwinds her scarf from around her neck and arranges it on the bench between them so she can lay the baby down without placing him directly on the cold, hard surface.

He should be wearing something warmer in the cold of the station, but that is something she can resolve after she's examined him.

"Hey there, beautiful boy," she says, taking both his tiny hands in hers. "I'm going to give you a little check-up, okay? You just tell me if anything hurts."

Lukas's stare is wide and unblinking as he gazes up at her. His mother watches closely as Belinda moves her hands over his soft, supple body.

She starts with the arm that is visibly bruised, gently probing at the injury with her fingers and then testing the joints, moving Lukas's arm up, down, bending shoulder, elbow, and wrist. He puckers his face in displeasure but doesn't cry out.

She tests each limb in turn, just to be certain he hasn't suffered any invisible damage. She presses gently on his belly, too, and he wriggles under her touch, a single surprised laugh escaping him.

Unlike his mother, he hasn't had time to learn not to trust. He is young enough that he won't remember this pain. He still has a chance to grow up knowing only love, as every child should.

"He's going to be fine," Belinda says. She wraps him in her warm, fleeced scarf, swaddling him like a newborn.

The woman sighs in relief. "Thank you." She moves quickly and snatches Lukas back into her arms, apparently at the end of her ability to be separated from him. She clutches him against her chest and presses her face into his hair, breathing in his scent.

"Do you have somewhere to stay tonight?" Belinda says.

The woman looks at her and frowns. She shakes her head slowly. "I was going to stay with a friend, but she is out of town."

"I know some people who are like you. Shifters. If you come with me, we can help you. Protect you, if you need it."

The woman balks. "Shifter? I do not understand."

The few days Belinda has been away from home must be enough that she isn't carrying Marshall's wolf-scent anymore. "My brother and my son are wolves, as are most of our Pack,

but we have others, too. Other Shifters we've taken in. A cougar, and a coyote. You'd be welcome for as long as you like."

"Where?"

"It's a few hours from here, but I have my car. I can take you to them."

The woman thinks for a long time. Lukas starts up a cry, not loud, but building, and that seems to make up her mind. "Yes. Okay."

\* \* \* \* \*

Natasha hadn't known what to think when the woman, Belinda, said her family were Shifters. When they reach her car, though, there can be no doubt. It smells of something like dog, but not; wolves, she assumes, like Belinda said.

Belinda fusses about the lack of car seat, but Natasha doesn't want to let go of Lukas again. After a few minutes, Belinda relents, although she insists that Natasha sit in the back if she is going to hold the baby. She rattles off statistics Natasha can barely understand about passenger seats and car accidents.

Natasha is exhausted from remaining alert through the whole ride from Boston, but she stays awake on the long drive by sheer force of will. She catches herself dozing once or twice and shakes her head fiercely. She wants to trust Belinda, this woman who is not Shifter but still claims a Pack, but she does not know her well enough. She can't sleep until she is sure that Lukas will be safe.

She feeds him while Belinda drives and avoids answering the questions the woman asks about her and about Laurent. When Natasha won't answer, Belinda turns instead to talking about her own life: her work as an EMT, her brother the wolf, who owns a diner in their town, and the struggle of raising three teenaged Shifters when she had never developed the ability herself.



It is to the diner that Belinda takes her when they get to town. She says that's where the Pack will be, and she wants to introduce them. Natasha wants a bed more than she wants to face more strangers, but she won't be picky, not when Belinda has offered their help.

A bell chimes over the diner's door as Belinda pushes it open, and a tempting wash of heated air rushes past Natasha's face. On it ride the scents of half a dozen other Shifters, some fresh and others older but strong, as if their owners come here often. She smells wolf, like the car, something else not quite like a dog, and also – *cat*.

It's not the same as the scent of a lynx, like Laurent and her own family back in Romania, but it is close. *Predator*, her senses warn her, the hair rising sharply on her neck and forearms, and she cannot help but take a step back.

"Is something wrong?" Belinda asks.

"Bell? Is that you?" A man comes to the door that is still half-open. He is grinning, his dark hair just beginning to silver at the temples. "Who's this?"

He smells of wolf. In Europe, she knows, wolves have been known to kill and eat lynxes. Coming here was a mistake.

She backs away quickly but doesn't turn her back on the predator smiling from the diner's doorway until she is almost at the back of the parking lot.

"Natasha, it's okay. No one here is going to hurt you. Come on inside; let us get you something to eat."

They cannot be trusted. She should have known better. When she reaches the street, she turns and runs.

She runs without direction until she decides she has put enough distance between her and the diner. She is in a neighborhood lined with small, comfortable-looking houses, and grief

strikes her at the sight of them: places for families. Homes. Once again, she is stranded with nowhere to go.

Her best option would be to leave town, but it is late, and she has no transportation without Belinda to drive. She walks back to the main street and discovers one motel in town, a small, run-down place with fewer than thirty rooms and a rusty balcony running the length of the second floor.

She hands over her credit card to the clerk to pay for a room. She won't be able to use it forever, but for now, she thinks, Laurent can pay for their bed. He owes her this much, though he wouldn't agree.

Lukas stirs on her hip as the clerk hands the card back, and she shushes him until they get to the room. Decades of use have worn layers of scent into the plain beige walls. She asked for a non-smoking room, but the lingering stench of stale cigarettes is as thick as an extra coating of paint. The bedding smells of former occupants, the bathroom and sheets of bleach and whatever harsh industrial products the cleaning staff use. Beneath those there are hints of dust mites in the carpet and the pillows, and greasy remnants of fast food meals eaten at the miniscule desk shoved into the corner by the solitary window.

She feeds and changes Lukas again before she rests and takes the spare shirt from her bag, spreading it on one side of the mattress so he doesn't have to sleep on the ratty comforter. She is too tired to care about her own sleeping conditions. She lies down beside her son and is asleep in a matter of moments.

The next morning, she bundles Lukas back into Belinda's scarf. Her stomach cramps with hunger. She has not eaten since before the train ride yesterday. Before she can decide what to do next, she needs to eat.

She opens the door to the motel room and a horribly familiar scent is waiting on the other side.

“Hello, *mon amour*.”

Panic freezes her at the sound of his voice. No. *No*. He can't have found them, not here.

Laurent leans against the rusted railing outside of her room. His lovely, angular face is hard. His eyes are his own human blue. She fell in love with that face and those eyes, fooled by his beauty. He wasn't a big man, only a couple of inches taller than her, but he was lean and muscular, everything a man should be, or so she thought. “You have something that belongs to me.”

“No!” This time she says it out loud. “You can't have him. He's mine too. *Fiul meu, copilul meu*.”

Laurent stalks forward, backing her into the room. “I've told you not to speak that gypsy tongue to me.” Her linguistic advantage had long been one of his sticking points with her. She could speak French, his mother tongue, but he had never bothered to learn hers. It didn't matter that he was the one with the college education, the one with a job that supported their little family; he didn't like her to have any skill that he lacked.

Defiance sings alongside the fear in her blood and she spits a string of Romanian curses. He may not know the translation, but she knows he understands her meaning. Startled by her vitriol, Lukas begins crying.

“*Putain!*” Laurent snarls, as if he has not called her that and worse a thousand times before. “You're not going to keep my son from me.”

“You hurt him!” she cries back. “You've been hurting me for years and I let you do it, let you make me think I loved you, but I won't let you hurt him again.”

“I’ll do a lot worse than hurt you if you don’t give me back my son.”

He’ll kill her, he means, but Natasha doesn’t care. He’s never fought with the intent to kill her before, only to vent his anger. She’s accustomed to letting him win, because he worked his rage out faster if she didn’t put up as much of a fight. This time she has to win. She doesn’t care if he takes her with him; this is about making sure he can’t have Lukas.

He continues stalking forward and she backs away, her steps measured against his, until her legs bump up against the bed. It will be easier to fight him as the lynx, and he hasn’t Shifted yet. If she can Shift first, she will have the advantage. But to Shift, she will have to put Lukas down. Putting him down will make him vulnerable. She will have to keep herself between Laurent and him.

In her moment of consideration, she loses the advantage. Laurent takes a step backward, and it is all the warning she gets before the Shift takes him. From one second to the next, he is a lynx, and he screams his rage at her.

She doesn’t have a choice anymore. Natasha scrambles backward over the bed, deposits Lukas back on the mattress, then jumps over it, back toward Laurent. By the time she hits the floor, she is on four feet instead of two.

\* \* \* \* \*

Grant is approaching the end of the trail when he hears an animal scream, echoed by another. He picks up his pace and follows his ears instead of his nose.

Belinda stopped by the farm that morning and told his father, Will, about the Shifter she’d tried to bring home last night. A victim of abuse and her infant son, both bearing recent bruises. She was some kind of big cat like him, Belinda thought.

Another victim of abuse, like him.

He'd been out tracking them down since the moment she finished her story, although Belinda had said the woman was likely long gone. He'd started at the diner and tracked her by scent. It would have been easier as a cougar, rather than having to bend to "tie his shoe" while he sniffed the sidewalk, but a mountain lion would hardly be a welcome sight among the sleepy Allegheny neighborhoods where she'd wandered. His Pack-mates could be mistaken for large dogs; he could not.

The scream came from the motel, and he curses his stupidity. He should have checked there first, rather than following the meandering path she had taken. He'd been thinking like a Shifter, not like a parent. An animal could spend the night wherever there was natural shelter; a human baby could not.

Another scream sounds, and he breaks into a run. Two motel patrons and the front desk attendant, a high schooler he's seen hanging around with Marshall, are outside the front doors gaping fearfully at the second floor. One door stands open, and the screams are coming from that room. Behind them, the wail of a crying baby pitches against the harsh morning light.

"I called 9-1-1 but I don't know what to do," the high schooler says.

Fuck. They can't have cops crawling around a Shifter mess. The saving grace is that they're in the motel and likely won't be traced back to the Pack, although it still wasn't good to have Normals looking closely at animal violence where it didn't belong. Grant prays that none of them actually saw the Shifters do anything uncanny.

He takes the rickety iron stairs two at a time and bursts into the motel room. Two lynxes are facing off. The larger, the male, lunges and feints, preparing but not attacking outright. The female holds her ground between him and the bed. The crying baby fidgets and screams on the mattress.

When she sees Grant, the female turns her scream on him, sharper and fiercer than before. Fear pours off of her in reeking waves. The male takes advantage of her momentary distraction and strikes. Both of his paws come down on her face. She flips and kicks her paws in response, coming back to her feet and lunging in turn.

Grant knows of only one way to end this fight, and he is ever aware of the clock ticking down until the police arrive. He slams the motel door behind himself and falls forward into his own Shift.

His cougar is nearly twice the size of either of their forms, and the female falls back at the sight of him, trying to keep herself between both attackers and her baby. Protecting him at any cost.

Grant doesn't contain the snarl that rises in his throat.

The male turns and in a mirror of the previous act of their fight, the female lunges while he is distracted. She comes down on the back of his neck. Her teeth sink into fur and flesh. He flips and claws and they leap back from each other.

Before either of them can try again, Grant pounces.

The male folds beneath him and he wraps his jaws around his throat. Swinging him in a move usually meant to snap the necks of prey, Grant throws him against the wall. The lynx crumples and lies unmoving for a long, dreadful moment.

Grant does not want to kill him. He has spent years being certain he won't become like the father whose memory drove him out the door this morning. Killing would be one step in a direction he refuses to take.

He plants himself between the female and the wounded male and flattens his ears.

The lynx grumbles and heaves himself to his feet. He seems to consider attacking again. The female steps up by Grant's side and draws back her lips in a silent snarl.

Outside, a siren approaches and swings into the parking lot, wailing louder than the baby on the bed.

The male acknowledges defeat with a final scream and Shifts back into human form. Grant gets a momentary look at a wiry, mean-looking man with dark blonde hair and blood streaking the side of his neck. The man speaks to the lynx in a stream of musical syllables Grant doesn't understand, and then he yanks open the door and is gone.

With the threat removed, Grant pads across the room, allowing as much distance as he can between the remaining lynx and himself. He faces her and Shifts back, then sits on the floor, back to the wall, and sticks his hands under his butt. It looks stupid, he's sure, but the message it sends is clear: he doesn't intend to hurt her.

"The police are here, and we've got maybe thirty seconds before they come through that door," Grant tells her. "This will all be a lot easier if we don't have to explain your furry situation along with that blood on the carpet."

She chuffs, and her tufted ears tip toward the approaching sound of boots on the iron steps. She whines her displeasure, but Shifts back, becoming a small, slender blonde woman. Too thin, really, he thinks. Claw marks rake one side of her face, across from her cheek to her nose.

"Why would you help us?" she asks.

Grant doesn't have time to answer before the police throw open the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Natasha has no idea what she would have said to the police if the other Shifter hadn't been there to smooth things over. They seem to know and respect him, though he can only be a few years older than her. He must have talked to Belinda, because the story he tells is as close to the truth as they can get without including the details that Normals can't know: she was on the run from her abusive ex-boyfriend. He had tracked her down but run off when the man, whose name is apparently Grant, interfered.

He is as physically different from Laurent as a man could be. A cliché comes to mind when she examines his form; tall, dark, and handsome. His black hair gleams with hints of red in the sunlight outside the motel room, his skin is tanned, and the muscle wrapping his arms is thick instead of wiry. She had thought their scents similar last night, when she'd encountered his presence at the diner, but she'd been wrong. The earthy musk he carries is entirely different.

Belinda is one of the two EMTs who come in when the police are satisfied. She fusses over Natasha's wounded face and bandages it. Natasha doesn't tell her that Laurent has done much worse in the past. She has a feeling she already knows.

Belinda chivvies the other EMT out the door after they finish with Natasha and examine Lukas all over again. Natasha is left alone with Belinda and Grant. When the sound of retreating footsteps fades from their hearing, Grant closes the door and reclaims his seat on the floor.

Exhaustion overtakes Natasha again, and she settles heavily onto the bed. Worn out by his tantrum, Lukas is sleeping, and she grips one of his little hands for comfort, his palm resting between her thumb and forefinger. Even in sleep, he responds to her touch. His tiny fingers clutch onto hers.

"You never answered my question before," she says to Grant.

"Hmm?"



He looks tired as well, although his eyes are alert as he watches her. Belinda looks between them and takes the chair by the desk. They are both obviously giving her space.

“Why?” she asks. “Why help us?”

He takes a deep breath and lets it out on a sigh. “I guess it isn’t enough to say it was the right thing to do?”

Belinda chuckles and reaches over to tousle his dark hair. It is a familiar gesture, motherly, although he is too old to be one of her sons. Grant scowls and tilts his head out of range.

“Is that why?” Natasha asks. She doesn’t think it is; or rather, she doesn’t think that’s his only reason.

“You want to know if you can trust us,” he says. “The Pack.”

“Yes.” Her voice is barely a whisper. He protected her and Lukas, but it isn’t enough to be sure. Laurent was kind once. He was a good mate. Until he wasn’t.

“You can,” he says. “You can, for the same reason I helped you today. Because once upon a time, I was like you. Or maybe more accurately, I was like him,” he nods at Lukas, “and the Pack helped me. They saved me from my father and took me in. A cougar in a Pack of wolves. I hadn’t even had my first Shift when Will adopted me.”

Natasha looks at them. At the woman in the chair, eyes full of compassion and still dressed in the uniform that declared her a helper; at the man on the floor who had stepped in to fight for her when they had never even met; and then down at her baby, sleeping and safe because they had reached out.

She echoes the words she spoke to Belinda last night, and this time when she says it, she is sure. “Yes. Okay.”

## LIKE FEELING

I tipped back a shot and whiskey burned its way down my throat. Then orange juice – refreshing acidity, a cool burn.

Alex whooped cheerfully by my side. “Atta girl!” She felt like carbonation, fizzy, bubbling, and warm-cold-warm, like a Coke drunk too fast. She and Brooke and Natalie were the only three familiar sensations in the throng: carbonation and the soft-smooth brush of velour and cloying, honey-sticky-sweetness against my sweating skin.

Mom called what I could do Seeing. I guess for her it was. For me, Seeing was more like Feeling.

The rumbling bass of the beat thrummed through me.

“Let’s do another!” Brooke shouted so we could hear her over the music. I’d lost track of how many we’d done already.

She waved at the bartender. He was sandpaper, rough and scraping, but he poured our drinks rapid-fire.

The whiskey burned less this time. I didn’t bother with the orange juice.

Alex grabbed my wrist and tugged me toward the dance floor. I grabbed Natalie, who grabbed Brooke, and we dragged each other through the press of bodies and auras and thriving, writhing energy until we found a space big enough for the four of us to dance.

My brain was a tilt-a-whirl as I moved forward and then kept moving, twisting and twirling and moving to music that was more beat and bass than song. I teetered on my high heels. The trick was to keep moving – I could keep my balance as long as I didn’t stop.

I lost track of my bubbles, velour, and honey in the crowd moving around me. The energy of the club was intoxicating. It was silk and stone and kitten-soft fur, rough birch bark and the buzz of static electricity, heat and sweat and the jagged shift of strangers' auras stroking and scraping my skin in time with the pulsing beat of the song that wasn't a song. The taste of whiskey lingered on my tongue.

A body that felt like rich, summer garden soil moved behind me, and I leaned into the feeling. Gardens and summer sun felt like home, felt like being back on the farm, like being a carefree child again.

I met Brooke's eyes, and she grinned. She tossed her long, coffee-dark hair and rolled her hips against a stranger's. Alex took my hand again, bubbles fizzing in her touch and sparkling in her blue eyes with the refraction of the DJ's flashing strobe lights. She tugged me forward and gave me a twirl. I caught a glimpse of the deep brown eyes of the man dancing at my back before Alex deposited me back in his arms.

I stumbled at the end of my turn and firm hands caught me, kept me from tipping over.

"You look like you need some air." His voice rumbled against my ears.

I nodded. His hands moved from my waist to the small of my back. Natalie waggled her eyebrows as he guided me away.

The air outside was less relief than I wanted. The night was warm and sticky with that afternoon's rain. I took deep breaths. My eyes struggled to adjust to the street lights now that I was away from the flashing, colorful display inside the club.

My eyes didn't seem to be working right at all. My balance waivered, and I reached for the man with me. He caught me, reeled me in.

"Easy, take it easy."

He handed me a bottle of water. I fumbled with the lid. Took a drink.

And then -

And then -

Nothing.

\* \* \*

I awoke in darkness, disoriented. The feeling of warm, dark soil pressed in around me, suffocating, nauseating. Even in the darkness I thought I was being watched.

I blinked against blindness, but there was no light. No anything.

Consciousness slipped from my grasp.

\* \* \*

A body moved against mine. Soil and skin and hot, hot pressure holding me down. I had no strength to push back.

The darkness was still there, all-encompassing. Blindfolded, I thought. He could see me. All I could do was Feel.

I'd been wrong about his aura. Not a warm summer garden, but the cling of moist soil that stained your fingers, the kind that creased the palms of your hands and never quite came out from under your nails.

The kind that made you forget what it felt like to be clean.

\* \* \*

Everything ached. My pulse sounded a drumbeat in my head. Still, I could not see.

Not blindfolded but sightless, I realized at some point. The darkness belonged to me.

Or to him.

I didn't realize there'd been no skin brushing up against me until it was back.

I wished I knew how not to Feel. How not to be.

Warm fingers caressed my face. Stroked across my belly. Between my thighs. I wriggled but could not escape.

Warm fingers replaced by sharp, cold metal.

One word: “*Mine.*”

Then pain.

\* \* \*

I came to in the hospital. It wasn't like waking up – I was already awake – but like my mind was a video camera that had only just begun recording again.

A doctor was cutting me out of my clothes. The cold edge of the scissors slid along my skin and I tried to pull away. There were hands on me, firm and holding, and I panicked. I screamed and thrashed and distantly realized my strength was returning.

The hands let go and backed away and then a nurse – a woman – was standing in front of me, reaching but not touching. I had to focus hard to hear her voice. “It’s okay, Jenna, you’re okay. You’re safe here. We just want to help you.” Easier to grasp onto was the Feel of her: soft, freshly washed cotton.

“If she can’t hold still, we’re going to have to sedate her,” a doctor said quietly. That one was metallic as cold, sterile steel.

I made an ugly sound. My face was wet. Crying.

I felt fuzzy. Why couldn’t I focus?

“Okay,” I said. My throat felt raw. My voice sounded like gravel.

The hands came back, and again I couldn’t stop myself flinching or whimpering at the touch.

“Why don’t you try letting her sit still on her own?” the nurse suggested.

I couldn’t stop shivering. The room wasn’t cold.

The two people in scrubs who’d been holding my arms left. It was just the doctor, the nurse, and me.

“Okay, hon, we really want to do this the easy way. If you need to take breaks, let us know, but we need to get you out of your clothes. Doctor Henney is here to help with what hurts, and I’m going to collect a rape kit. Do you know what that is?”

I shied away from the word. I didn’t want to remember.

*Deep, dark, warm, moist garden soil. Skin moving against mine. “Mine.” Fingers playing softly and then a knife, sharp in the darkness.*

“Okay, all right, you’re all right. Just breathe with me, hon.”

When had I stopped breathing?

I sucked in air with a gasp.

“All right,” the doctor said. “Let’s try this again.”

He moved slowly, like he was trying to avoid scaring me. I trembled but held as still as I could.

The skin he bared as he cut away my clothes was littered with bruises, some shaped in curves like teeth or striped with the lines of fingers. I didn’t remember teeth.

What else didn’t I remember?

I remembered the carving on my belly, but I hadn’t been able to see it. Its lines were sharp and intentional, a symbol of his possession, crusted and brown with my blood. “*Mine*,” he’d said. His. No one would ever want me again, stained and scarred with his mark.

My jaw hurt with how hard I clenched my teeth. I made fists around the scratchy paper on the examination table.

That didn't help enough. I closed my eyes against his mark. "*Mine,*" I heard. *Soil clung like the sweat on my skin.*

The nurse had a camera. I didn't look while she clicked and recorded my body. I opened my eyes again while the doctor cleaned and bandaged the wound. "I'm going to give you a prescription for a topical antibiotic," he said. "You'll want to apply it three times a day to prevent infection. Hopefully it'll help minimize the scarring."

Nothing could minimize it. I was marked.

He gave me other prescriptions, too. I could barely listen when he told me what they were for. He left me alone with the nurse while she did more: scraped under my nails, swabbed bite marks, worked efficiently over my body in search of any remnants of him.

"People are going to say a lot of things about this for a while," she said when she was done. "I want you to remember that nothing that happened is your fault."

I nodded mutely, but she was wrong. I'd been stupid. Frenchman Street was supposed to be safer than Bourbon, but that was no excuse. I shouldn't have gone out at all, shouldn't have combined alcohol with Feeling, shouldn't have let him separate me from my friends.

There were police detectives next, asking me questions I didn't have answers to. Where had he taken me? What did he look like? What had he said? Done? Was there anything that stood out? Would I know him if I saw him again?

There were others, I learned. Other victims. Others who bore his mark in their skin. All of us had been blinded; blindfolded, the others all said.

I didn't need to know his face to know I could pick him out of a crowd. I lied and told the detectives I remembered him from the club. My description was vague; dark eyes, brown hair, definitely white. It wasn't much to search by.

\* \* \*

I spent the next three days in bed. Alex brought me cafeteria food in the morning and evening but I couldn't eat. Her fizzing energy scraped against me. We were roommates, and I'd never resented sharing my space before.

"I can't believe this happened," she said the first morning. "I mean, the detectives gave us a hard time about not staying with you. I don't get it either. Like, we all know better, but it made sense at the time, you know?"

When she left for classes, I pulled down the blinds, curled up under my covers, and tried to forget. The bruises ached when I moved.

\* \* \*

Natalie was sickeningly sweet. Honey clung and dripped over my skin.

"I just want you to know I'm here for you. We all are. We feel so bad about letting him take you like that. I swear one second you were there and the next you were gone and by the time it occurred to us that something might be wrong, it was too late. Anything I can do to make it up to you, please, just tell me." Her voice was watery with tears.

I rolled over in bed to face the cinder block wall. What did she have to cry about?

\* \* \*

Brooke never came to visit. I asked about her, and Alex shrugged. "I think she feels guilty. She doesn't know what to say."

\* \* \*



The bandages and ointment kept the wound on my stomach from scabbing over. Deep red lines marred the fleshy space over my belly button. Weeks passed, and the skin closed. The bruises turned from violently red and purple to ugly blue, then sickly green and yellow. Eventually they vanished completely. But the carving did not fade.

“*Mine,*” I heard when I saw his mark, a haunting whisper that accompanied my own reflection. I kept it hidden from Alex. I hadn’t been shy before, but now I changed with my back to her.

\* \* \*

I never expected to hear from the detectives. It was nearly a month later when they called. They had a suspect in custody. Would I be willing to come in for a lineup?

Panic and nausea and *clinging, moist soil, the slick slide of skin against skin* welled and threatened to swallow me. I would never be free of his touch. *The phantom burn of the knife sliced me open.* Still, I agreed to go.

Alex and Natalie both offered to come with me. I refused. This was something I needed to do alone.

The precinct was crowded with clusters of desks, all topped with outdated computer monitors and stacks of paperwork. Every officer there seemed to know who I was. They had a sense for the presence of a victim, the same way I was attuned to their auras. The Feel of them pressed in around me, relentless, curious, pitying. The spiky end of a bale of hay, the scrubby brush of old carpet, the soft give of a sponge: their awareness entrapped me in a swell of *too much, too much.* I shuddered with awareness and couldn’t meet their eyes.

A young, uniformed officer approached. Her thick, kinky hair was pulled tightly back in a ponytail that bushed out behind her head, and her aura was the relief of pressing my cheek to

cool marble after too much time in the heat of the sun. “Don’t mind them,” she said. “They’re too nosy for their own good.”

She led me through to the back. One of the detectives from the hospital was there. He explained what would happen, just like on TV. One way glass, a row of men assigned numbers, and I could examine them for as long as I needed.

Both the officer and the detective came with me. I think she was just there for moral support so I wouldn’t have to be alone in the observation room with a man, although the detective’s presence was as unassuming as hers. He felt like wool, coarse but gentle.

The row of interchangeably similar men standing on the far side of the glass made me flinch. They were just what I had described: brown hair, brown eyes, all staring forward like they could see through to me. I looked for a face that seemed familiar, a glimpse of something from the club when I had seen him, even if it was only for a moment.

Nothing. Not a one of them was distinctive enough to be familiar.

They called for Number One to step forward. The man on the far left took several steps closer.

I couldn’t feel his aura from that distance. I couldn’t feel any of them.

“Can you –” My mouth was too dry to speak. I swallowed and tried again. “Can you make them come closer?”

The detective nodded and repeated my instructions. Number One walked up almost to the glass, and the detective looked my way.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Squishy-soft, like overripe berries that stained your fingers when you picked them.

“No,” I said. “It’s not him.”

Each man stepped forward and then back in his turn. Number Two was bumpy like stained glass. Number Three was itchy, a hundred sap-coated pine needle pricks. Number Four was old paper, rustling and dry.

Number Five only made it halfway to the mirror before I felt it. Warm sun and rich soil damp against my palms, sinking into the creases of my skin. *Soil and skin and hot, hot pressure holding me down, and I tried to fight but I couldn't move and could barely breathe, and I could never, ever be clean again, could never –*

Smooth marble, refreshing and cool, replaced the clinging warmth, and gentle hands touched my shoulders. I opened my eyes to the officer's concerned, liquid-dark gaze, grounding me in the present moment. "Easy, okay, you're okay, honey." She looked at the detective. "Why don't we take a break?"

I shook my head and stepped around her. He was right in front of the glass, still staring intently like he could see me on the other side. But he was the one blinded, who couldn't see me now.

"*Mine,*" I heard again, the phantom voice as always in my ears and in my head.

Not anymore.

I nodded. "Him."

## VITA

The author was born in Fallston, Maryland. She obtained her Bachelors' degrees in Creative Writing, English, and Psychology from Widener University in 2016. She joined the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans to pursue an MFA in fiction writing.