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“Only the bravest fight the dead.”

-Grand Elder Thomas, speech to graduating students, 2007

Chapter One

Had the roof over her head not been a broken mess, shredded insulation and pieces of tile dangling like the rotting innards of the living thing it had once been, she wouldn't be getting hit on the head with cold droplets of water at odd, annoying intervals.

That would have made her happier. Or at least not quite as unhappy. Nothing could have made her particularly happy at that moment, when she was about to wander down a dark hall where a ghost lurked, and hopefully manage to freeze it before it sliced off her head or stabbed her or whatever the hell else it planned to do. The odds of a ghost in this corpse of a building not having a weapon were—well, there were no odds at all. Only the dumbest ghost on the planet wouldn't have found some sort of weapon in this ramshackle palace of destruction, where her boots slogged through a good two inches of foul water, broken glass, metal shards, pulped books, and who the fuck knew what else.

“Think it's in there, Chess?” Riley Martin, the new Debunker she was training, pointed toward the mouth of the hallway ahead. In there the ceiling had apparently maintained its integrity; the hall was only shadows, a dark tunnel straight to the grave. Or rather the Crematorium, and the City of Eternity. None of which really sounded like a fun way to end her evening.

But neither did leaving the ghost here to kill other people, or telling the Church she'd decided to fuck off to the bar instead of doing her job. “Probably. No, don't turn your light on yet. Try not to if you can help it. Let's go stand right inside until our eyes adjust, okay?”

Riley nodded. Chess followed him, neither of them bothering to keep their movements quiet. If they could somehow attract the spirit, draw it out, that would be easier and safer. The last thing either of them wanted to do was to walk into some kind of ambush.

Fucking Lamaru. Fucking Arthur Maguinness-Beldarel shithead. If they hadn't played their little power games and set a bunch of ghosts free the month before, she wouldn't be out here doing something that technically wasn't her job, but which every Church employee capable of it had to do at least one night a week when they weren't otherwise engaged or on a case.

Which Chess wasn't. Damn it.

They stopped in the shadows; the thin breeze hadn't really penetrated there, so the horrible ammoniac stench, full of mold and worse, assaulted her nose the second they entered the hall. Her eyes stung.

But more than that, a warm tingling sensation began on her arms, up them and across her chest as her magical tattoos reacted to the presence of a spirit. A ghost was definitely present. She looked at Riley. "Are you feeling it?"

"I—I don't know. My skin feels kind of funny." What little of his face she could make out didn't look happy.

"You get used to it."

A flash of light down the hall, so fast she only saw it out the corner of her eye. But it had definitely been light, and it had definitely been the bluish light of a ghost.

Riley's breath caught. This was the time that, if she was a normal sort of person, she'd be able to say something reassuring but at the same time cool, the kind of thing that would make Riley feel brave but not patronized. And they'd both sort of smile and head off down the hall to Banish that ghost.

But she was not that kind of person, and the last thing she had any idea how to do was reassure someone and make them feel good about themselves. Cliché was probably about the best she could do, but she'd give it a try; Riley wasn't a bad kid, really.

"You'll be fine," was the attempt she made, and to her surprise it seemed to work. "Come on."

Every step they took, every slow step through the soup of bacteria and rot sucking at her boots, brought them closer to that faint death-glow. She'd mixed some graveyard dirt and asafetida earlier, stuck it in a bag in her pocket; now she reached inside and grabbed a small handful. Ready.

They moved a few steps in silence broken only by the occasional *plonk* of water dripping from the ceiling behind them. Something rattled back there. Chess spun around to look but saw nothing.

Ghosts weren't the only things that might hang out in abandoned buildings at night. They weren't in Downside, no, but they weren't exactly in the nicest area either; this building, which had once housed offices of some kind and a warehouse, stood just a few streets into Cross Town, a city block of condemned cement with a ten-foot chain-link fence around it.

A chain-link fence with holes in it. She wondered how many neighborhood kids had made this their permanent weekend hangout until two nights before, when one of them met their death just inside the front doors.

Another tiny glimpse of light.

"It is a ghost, right?" Riley whispered. "I mean, I feel like there's a ghost here, but could that be something else?"

"It could be anything else. But it's probably a ghost, yeah."

The comforting weight of her knife sat in her pocket. Debunkers weren't supposed to be armed. Fuck that. She'd rather take her chances with the Church's discipline should she be caught with the weapon than with anyone or anything she might come across in a place like this.

Not that she would need it anyway. Damn it, the kid's nervousness was making her twitch, and as much as she sympathized with him she really didn't need that at the moment. It had been a good two hours since she'd taken her pills, and while she still had time—she wasn't worried—places like this never really helped her keep calm. All that filth, all those germs, soaking into the bottoms of her jeans, brushing against her skin, her hair, invading her lungs. People caught diseases from places like this, specially after a rain.

Or they got their throats sliced open by ghosts armed with rusted shards of metal or whatever the fuck else. She edged her way down the hall, her back pressed against that gross excuse for a wall just because she couldn't really see well enough to walk down the center. The glow got stronger with every step. Her fist clenched around the dirt.

Another plonk. A rattle. Something like a whisper, that could have been a voice or the sound of a makeshift blade leaving its sheath of soaked pulp or crumbled cement. The glow from a doorway another ten feet or so down the hall.

In its reflection Riley's face looked even paler. The only thing keeping hers from looking the same—assuming it didn't, which she was just going to go ahead and do—was the fact that she was still just high enough to not be quite as scared as she should be. And the fact that she was an absolute fucking expert at lying to herself.

But with every step closer to that glowing doorway that ability grew just a little bit weaker.

Whatever. Wasn't like she could just turn around and run. So instead she took one last deep breath, and spun around the doorframe with her arm ready to throw the dirt at the first dead thing that moved.

And found herself staring at three teenagers, who were obviously very alive, who obviously thought they'd done something very clever, and who should have been thanking the gods who didn't exist that Riley was there too because if he hadn't been she would have been very, very tempted to beat the shit out of them with the nearest heavy object.

"What are you doing here?" Riley asked, but it was obvious from the stunned looks on their faces. Whoever they'd been expecting to walk through that door, it wasn't two Church employees.

One of them—the ringleader, or whatever—glanced at the other two, and cleared his throat when they didn't speak up. Fucking cowards. "We, uh, we thought you were some friends of ours."

Damn it, why were her tattoos still tingling, if a ghost wasn't in this room? This didn't feel right, not at all, and she needed to get those little bastards out of there as quickly as possible. "You need to leave, okay? Just go home."

"We've been in here for like an hour," one of them replied. The flashlight he'd hidden under his dark blue jacket still glowed, made him glow. That's where that had come from, she guessed, but nothing about these kids should have been setting off the alarms in her tattoos. Something else was around, waiting. "We haven't seen anything."

"Oh, right. That must mean nothing is here. This is such a small building." She stepped sideways from the door; Riley, she was pleased to see, had already taken a step back into the hall. "You need to get out of here."

"But we can help you," the first guy started.

Started, but didn't get to finish. Because before the last word formed in the air the ghost—ghosts—who'd clearly been waiting for just this sort of noisy fun, slipped through the walls. Four of them.

And thanks to the debris and shit on the floor, including what appeared to be a damned cigarette lighter sitting on top of a backpack tucked against one of the drier sections of wall, they were armed ghosts.

Chess started to throw her dirt, put as much power behind it as she could, but missed as the three teenagers freaked out and started running. One of them knocked her against the wall; the other bounced off her and tumbled back. The third...the third had a face half-obscured by blood, presumably from the chunk of concrete the ghost beside it was readying for another swing.

The kids screamed. Riley yelled something. Chess fought the rising tides of fear and irritation and grabbed another handful of dirt.

Go for the concrete-wielding ghost first, because if it smacked that kid again there'd be a nice layer of brains added to the general slime and mess on the floor. She managed to freeze that one, glanced around to see Riley doing the same with another.

That left two. Two ghosts and three teenagers who really should have fucking known better, crowded into that small space that had probably once been some sort of reception area or something. There was barely room to move in there, much less do anything else, and two of the ghosts were not only still mobile but had found themselves some weapons to bring to the party.

Flames erupted in the corner of her vision. That backpack had apparently been filled with papers—of course it was, they were high-school kids—and one of the ghosts had set them alight. Had set the whole bag alight. It threw the flaming sack at her.

She ducked, and slipped in the vile sludge covering the floor. Eeew. Cold water—and who knew what else, probably blood and urine and vomit—soaked her jeans.

Worse, while she'd been distracted the other moving ghost had found itself a length of pipe and used it to try to knock off one of the teenagers' heads like a ball off a tee.

At least that's what she assumed had happened. The flashlight in the one guy's jacket had gone out, or been smashed. The unearthly, hideous glow of the four spirits provided the room's only illumination, giving everything the unreal look of a nightmare.

Riley yelled something. She barely heard it over the sound of her breath in her ears and the shouts of the teens. One of them slipped just as she had. The ghost raised its pipe.

Graveyard dirt still in her fist. She threw it, threw her power too. The ghost froze but dropped the pipe; it clattered on the kid's back, knocked him down into the floor sewage.

Riley had apparently managed to freeze the fourth ghost. Not that it mattered that much. It wasn't like they'd stay frozen forever; ten minutes tops. They needed to get passports on the things, and they needed to get a salt circle down as fast as possible—that would be fun, in the wet sludge.

And they needed to get those motherfucking kids out of there before the scent of their blood, the taste of their terror in the air, attracted more dead. Who knew how many there may be in the area? She and Riley had been told to expect two at the most, and here

there were four. Like some kind of deadly double-score bonus on the world's worst game show.

Well, hey, at least she got to win something, right?

"Riley, get them out of here." She managed to stand, cringing at the feel of her nasty wet jeans touching her skin, and started digging through her bag for her salt. "I'll try to get a circle down."

"I don't think I can," Riley said.

"What?" Had some of the salt spilled when she fell? She'd thought she packed more.

"I don't think I can."

How could he not shoo a couple of injured kids out of the building? They were probably desperate to leave anyway. She looked up at him, annoyed, but what she saw changed the annoyance to the sort of oh-fuck-no feeling she was all too used to.

He stood against the wall, his face pale, his body still, staring at the ghosts with fear-wide eyes. "I don't think I can, Chess. I'm sorry, but I—look at what they did, look at those kids."

"Yeah, but Riley, they're frozen now, right? They can't move. Let's just—I'll lay the circle and you start the ritual, okay? Or you lay the salt. The sooner we start the sooner we can get out of here, right?"

He shook his head. "I can't get close to them."

"You got close to them in training." In another minute or two the first ghost was going to shake off the power holding it—him—and start moving again. She needed to at least get him marked, and now. "Remember training? You can do this, you can."

"That was different. That was in class, with the Elders and everybody. I can't...I can't..."

Choice time. Keep trying to coddle Riley and hope to get him to de-stun, or ignore him and Banish four ghosts by herself, with her lone psychopomp, which would probably require at least two separate callings.

The teenagers—aside from the one who'd run, and the one with the broken nose who huddled against the wall moaning—watched with interest. That, at least, wasn't a tough decision. "Get your friends and get the hell out of here. Now."

"But, we want to watch you—"

Her sigh felt like it passed through every inch of her body before it finally came out. "Get. The hell out. Now. Or I will make sure you all get a nice long afternoon in the stocks next Holy Day."

Finally, something she said produced some kind of result. They left, brushing past her as they walked out the door. They'd probably stand just outside listening, and the knowledge pissed her off, but it would take too much time to lecture them some more.

"Riley. Are you going to help me?"

He shook his head. Great.

Another bone-sucking sigh, and she popped the cap on her Ectoplasmarker. At least her psychopomp could be counted on to behave the way it was supposed to.

“Teach your children from a young age to be careful in their choice of friendships. Unwise acquaintances can have unforeseen consequences.”

~*Families and Truth*, a Church pamphlet by Elder Barrett

Chapter Two

And it had, thankfully, but the whole thing—including driving that pussy Riley back to the Church, and filing her report, and giving Elder Griffin a quick run-down of Riley’s freakout—took way longer than she’d thought, which pissed her off. One of the benefits of taking a newbie along was supposed to be sticking them with the paperwork. Just her luck to get the one who couldn’t handle it.

That wasn’t fair of her, but she wasn’t really in the mood to be fair. Especially not when the effects of her pills were starting to wear off, leaving her ragged around the edges and even antsy than she would ordinarily be. She grabbed her pillbox from her bag, shook four Cepts into her palm and downed them with a slug of water before heading for the shower. Rushing through her shower, really, and everything that came after.

That quick, tickly, lifting sensation in her stomach—that feeling that never got old, that feeling she would give her soul for and pretty much had—intensified when she finally got to Trickster’s bar about an hour and a half after leaving the Church. Later than she wanted, but still there, and sometimes that was all that mattered. At least she’d made it, and given the whole quadruple-ghost fun, the result could have been a lot different.

Red assaulted her eyes when she stepped into the building, like walking into a bordello in hell—if hell existed, which it didn’t. Or rather, no one else thought it did. For them the City of Eternity, where everyone’s souls lived on after death, was a peaceful loving place, a quiet rest several hundred feet below the surface of the earth. Only Chess thought of it as hell, as punishment, cold and unrelenting and miserable. Life sucked, yes, but the City was worse.

Then again, sometimes life could be okay. Terrible stood in his usual spot against the back wall, talking to a couple of guys whose names she could never really remember. They all looked the same to her, to be honest, or maybe it was simply that she never really bothered to look at them. Their faces didn’t interest her. Nothing they said interested her, not when she could be talking to Terrible instead.

Seeing him was like being hit in the chest. Like something exploded inside her, a quick ravenous fire that made her shiver. So bright and so hot it still amazed her that no one else seemed to notice it, that every eye in the place didn’t turn to her while she went incandescent.

But they didn’t—which was a good thing, since spontaneous human combustion would probably raise an eyebrow even there. No one seemed to notice at all. They were all too busy drinking dollar beers, listening to X’s “Johnny Hit and Run Paulene,” and talking or arguing or trying to pick each other up. Spiky heads, heads bald or slick with pomade,

like bizarre flowers strewn in a humid half-dead meadow, swaying in a stale-beer breeze. None of them turned to her.

Excellent. She didn't want to be noticed. She never did, but especially not just then.

She shoved a couple of bucks at the bartender for her own beer and a tip and pushed her way through the field of oblivion-hunters until she reached him, stopping about a foot away, careful to not quite meet his eyes.

He did the same. "Hey, Chess. You right?"

She shrugged. Sipped her beer. "Right up. What time do they go on?"

"Ain't for certain. Ten minutes maybe, fifteen? Thought you was coming earlier."

"I was. My trainee lost it, I had to handle it all myself."

"Handle what?"

She gave him a quick rundown, her mind only half on her words. The rest was examining him, his black hair slicked back with pomade, the width of his shoulders, his height. His face, the face she'd once thought was ugly with its crooked, repeatedly broken nose, its scars, its heavy brow and thick muttonchop sideburns. The kind of face people ran away from, because the only place it looked like it belonged was behind a loaded weapon. Hell, it made his body look like a loaded weapon. Which it was. And that's all people saw.

People were shitbags, with their easy smiles and their cold eyes and brutal hearts. She knew that better than anyone. Knew too that the face she looked at wasn't ugly, that it was strong and it was Terrible's. That meant it was hers to look at as much as she wanted, and that made something she thought might be real happiness ride higher in her chest.

"Telling on getting shit done," he said, "Bump got an ask for you. Whyn't you come on out back, lemme give you the knowledge."

She shifted on her feet, glanced at the other guys still standing there, waiting to be included in the conversation. "Can't it wait?"

"Could, aye, but might as well give it you now."

The song ended; in the second or two of silence before the next one started she nodded. "Yeah, okay then. But let's make it fast. I don't want to miss the band."

He shrugged. "Neither me. Longer you stand here, longer us take gettin back in, aye?"

She cocked an eyebrow at him, still careful not to look him in the eye, and headed down the hall that led to the bathrooms and the back door. Technically it wasn't a back door. Technically it was an emergency exit. But the alarm wires had been ripped from the wall years before, and even if they hadn't been it wouldn't have mattered. Fire trucks didn't respond to calls from Downside in general; one too many false alarms that ended in muggings and murders had stopped that particular service, and there was little worth saving there anyway.

Terrible pushed it open for her. She ducked under his arm and stepped into the alley, the soft squelch of still-wet dead leaves and garbage under her shoes reminding her for one unpleasant second of the earlier fun in the construction swamp. She couldn't decide which one smelled better, either, but neither were pleasant.

But where the building had been full of people and ghosts, the alley was empty. Not even any light from the tenement windows behind occupied the space; only the dull glow of the gibbous moon overhead showed her that no living beings—no human ones, at least—waited there.

Terrible obviously noticed that too. The sound of the exit door slamming back into its frame hit her ears at the same time his body hit hers, slamming her against the back wall, further into the shadows where no one could see him kiss her long and hard.

Had she thought seeing him made her insides explode? She'd been wrong. *This* was an explosion. This was better than anything else; sometimes she thought it was even better than her pills. At his touch something inside her, something that had been tense and twisted and black, finally relaxed. At his touch something inside her that was constantly terrified found a little security.

Security Chess hoped and hoped would last, despite the nagging voice in the back of her mind that insisted it couldn't, it wouldn't; she didn't deserve it, and she should just give up on the very idea.

Fuck that stupid voice. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pushed her hands down the collar of his shirt to feel the bare skin of his back warm beneath her palms. He was always warm. His own hands left shivering trails of heat from her face to her throat, blazed up her thighs and ribcage, over her breasts.

Finally he pulled away enough to meet her eyes. That jolt of electricity, the one she'd been so careful not to feel inside the bar, hit her now. Her cheeks tightened, her mouth curved into a grin she couldn't stop. "I was afraid I wasn't going to make it at all."

"Aye, me too. Glad you did. Feelin like I ain't seen you in weeks."

"It's been three days."

"Aye, but...feels longer. We all clear now?"

She nodded. The past week had been the first time in her life she wished she wasn't what she was, wasn't a witch, didn't have extra power in her blood that meant anyone coming in contact with it might be affected by it; wished such an effect wasn't part of the marriage ceremony, and meant a commitment she didn't think either of them was ready to make.

If she wasn't a witch it wouldn't matter. Marriages were bound by blood and magic combined, not one or the other, so required the Church's assistance. But magic was in her blood, and that meant spending six days burning with frustration.

His eyebrows rose; his hands wandered with more purpose. "You ain't really wanna stay for the band, aye? Whyn't we head on out now instead?"

"I thought you wanted to see the band," she teased.

"Changed my thought. Let's us go. Back my place, aye?" He was smiling, that smile she'd always loved, while his hands distracted her and his body warmed her through her clothes. Summer drew closer every day, and the temperatures reflected that, but it seemed like she was always cold when he wasn't around. "C'mon."

"My place is closer."

"Aye." He leaned in to bite her neck; she shivered. "But mine's got thicker walls, dig, an I plan on makin you scream a few times afore we get to sleeping."

I took her a minute to draw enough breath to speak, through a throat suddenly too tight for anything but a gasp. “I thought we decided we wanted to actually get out tonight, though.”

“And done it. Now us can go back in.”

“I don’t know,” she managed to say. It was becoming more difficult to talk, especially since he’d started sucking gently on her neck, making her dizzy. Without her consciously ordering it to do so her right hand slid down below his belt, finding him hard beneath his jeans and pressing against him. “I really thought you wanted to see the band. You have me for the whole night, you know.”

“Aw, c’mon, Chessiebomb. Car’s right nearby. Whyn’t you come into the car with me. That’s still out, aye? And say our proper hellos.”

“I guess we—”

The sound of his phone ringing, a loud jangly sort of ring, cut her off.

“Ignore it,” she suggested, but she knew he couldn’t. They both knew he couldn’t. Midnight was practically the start of a normal day in Downside, yes, but she doubted anyone who’d be calling him at that hour would have good news.

She was right. Within seconds of answering the phone his face darkened; darkened and took on that look she’d only seen a few times before, that lowered-brow-narrowed-eyes look of absolute rage. The kind of look that would be the last thing the person who caused it would ever see. His fingers tightened on her waist.

“Aye,” he said. “Get em—aye. On my way.”

Her heart sank. Looked like they weren’t going back to anybody’s place, to anybody’s bed. At least not for a long time.

His phone snapped shut. “Pipe room’s burnin.”

“What?”

He was already walking up the alley, back toward the street, holding her hand in an almost painful grip. “Fuckin Slobag, ’swhat. Pipe room up Sixtieth, green one. On fire.”

She didn’t want to say “what” again, but she couldn’t help it. She couldn’t seem to get any other words into her head. A pipe room burning? All those people, even on a weeknight. All that Dream, waiting to be smoked, waiting to send those people into a soft golden fog. Gone. “What?”

He didn’t answer. She had to trot to keep up as he pulled her along, dropping her hand just before they emerged from the alley. She almost wished he wouldn’t, wished they hadn’t decided to keep everything secret. Certainly she could have used a little more contact at that moment. With every step the awful picture in her mind grew clearer: burning bodies in a pit of flames, exploding glass, storerooms full of Dream knobs, their smoke wasted. She wrapped her arms around herself to still her shivers.

Terrible’s car, a black 1969 BT Chevelle, waited for them in the circle of pale yellow cast by one of the few working streetlights. Waited being the operative word. To Chess the car always seemed ready to leap from its resting place, ready to start mowing down pedestrians just because it could.

But it didn’t. Instead it stayed silent and still while Terrible opened the door for her, closed it behind her and got in on the driver’s side.

On their way to the fire, to the—wait. “The one on Sixtieth? Didn’t you say nobody’s in that one, Bump’s doing something else with it?”

“Aye.” The car plowed away from the curb in a squeal of rubber. “Were thinkin on makin it storing rooms, dig, getting other shit done there too. Figured on setting a new room a block up.”

“So no one died.” The tightness in her chest eased a bit.

“Naw. Least not what Bernam say. Maybe one or two in there, ain’t can say certain. But nobody ought, leastaways.”

“Good.”

He glanced at her, swinging the heavy car right, north on Sixtieth. “Aye, cepting, how Slobag knew nobody in there?”

“If the room’s closed—”

“Ain’t hardly nobody got that knowledge, though. Nobody been told. Just let em know tonight, first night it shut down.”

“Maybe he didn’t know. Maybe he didn’t care who he killed.”

Terrible snorted. “Still a fuck of a chance.”

She sat for a few seconds watching his profile, finally rested a hesitant hand on his thigh, not sure it was welcome. Not sure if she should say anything. Anger still hovered around him, filled the car and tried to find a way into her body. She felt it like icy fingers sliding over her skin.

Not much she could do when he was in that kind of mood, at least not in the car on the way to check the wreckage.

Not to mention...he hadn’t said anything. She didn’t know if he was thinking it, if he’d thought of it. But he probably had.

If Slobag had some sort of inside information about Bump’s operations, he had to be getting that information from somewhere. And there she was, the one person Terrible knew for a fact had been in Slobag’s pocket; or to put it more bluntly, Terrible knew she’d been in Slobag’s son’s bed, for months. Knew she still talked to him.

How long before she became a suspect?

“Because they had no unified rule, they had no peace. Peace in the world can only be found through the Church, just as peace of the soul can only be found through the Church.”

~*A History of the Old Government, 1620-1800*, from the introduction by the Grand Elder

Chapter Three

The last vestiges of the cheer she'd managed to find at Trickster's evaporated. It wouldn't be long. He'd think of it. He'd wonder.

And she couldn't blame him. What was she supposed to do, get all pissed and indignant because he didn't trust her? Why the hell should he trust her? He'd trusted her before and she'd paid him back by fucking his enemy. For months. He'd be stupid not to wonder about her now.

That sucked. But it was true.

Their destination wasn't difficult to spot. The Chevelle growled up Sixtieth, chasing the orange glow of the flames ahead. A fire indeed. The building had simply disappeared. In its place a set of half-walls created a bowl of fire, surrounded by curious onlookers standing too close even though it was spring. A few of them held out sticks with various animal parts on the ends; free fire to cook with shouldn't be wasted.

Chunks of cement littered the pavement, more and more of them the closer they got until finally Terrible had to park because there were too many of them to go around. Broken glass sparkled under their feet.

Against the angry flames, Bump's profile stood like a pimp-shaped inkspot, his hat brim ostentatiously wide, his cape moving in the breeze. Even at a distance she could see how pissed he was, just from the way he held his shoulders.

The closer they got the more obvious it was. He glowered at the fire, glowered at Terrible, glowered at her. “You finding they, Terrible, yay? Fuckin make they dead.”

It wasn't much of a greeting, but she supposed it could be excused under the circumstances. Hell, even if they weren't standing in front of what was probably half a million dollars or so on fire, it could be excused; it would have to be excused. No matter who she slept with, no matter who she still couldn't believe she was lucky enough to sleep with, the fact was that at its base her relationship—such as it was—with Bump entailed the biggest power imbalance possible. She was a junkie. He was her dealer.

In other words, he got to say whatever he wanted to her, do whatever he wanted to her, treat her like less than nothing, and she got to take it without resistance if she wanted to keep getting her pills. Which she did.

He glanced at her now. “Ay, Ladybird. Ain't fuckin supposing you witchy skills fuckin find they done it.”

She shook her head. “Sorry” sat on the tip of her tongue; she swallowed it. “Not the sort of thing I can do, no.”

“But you got them fuckin snooping skills, yay? Do you finding out things, on you fuckin cases or whathefuck them is you doin.”

Shit. Usually the problem she had with people knowing her job was that they thought she could wave her hand and make things disappear or whatever; now she had Bump obviously thinking she was some sort of Sherlock Holmes or something and could just pop in and find out who—of the hundreds, even thousands of possible suspects—had spied, had set this up.

If she had a choice...well, she'd probably still say yes, because this affected Terrible's life, and that made it something she needed to do. But she didn't have a choice anyway.

“I'll try.” She shifted her weight, hoped she didn't look as uncomfortable as she felt. “But really, I don't know any of the people involved, so I don't really see what I can do.”

“Aw, nay, ain't you fuckin count youself short. Got them fuckin brains hidin in you head, yay? You use em for Bump. Use em for Terrible, yay? Got the thinkin you catch this one straightup fast, yay, fuckin straightup. What fuckin happening if them get Terrible afore you fuckin get the finding? Thinkin you ain't fuckin liking that.”

No, she certainly wasn't fucking liking that. Did he not realize that was why she'd agreed to help out?

Nor did she like the sleazy little implication that if she didn't spend all of her time investigating this it was evidence of her not caring that much about Terrible. Bump had managed to connect the case and her relationship, the bastard, and used her own emotions and entanglements to force her to do his bidding.

But what else was fucking new? Wasn't like she could do anything about it. Power imbalance, remember? Yeah. She remembered. Remembered every time she cracked her pillbox or lit up a kesh or managed half an hour at the pipes. Terrible kept her together. But Bump...her pills and everything else...those made sure something existed for him to hold.

She'd known it was a mistake to tell Bump what was happening between them, what had happened. Being right usually felt a lot better than it did at that moment. This night was just going from shitty to shitty, wasn't it?

“I'll do whatever I can.”

Bump gave her a slow, fluid sort of nod, the kind that told her he'd known all along that she would do it, and how he'd get her to do it. Damn him. He wasn't stupid; no one got to be lord of the streets west of Forty-Third—almost all of Downside—without being smart, tough, and fast, and of course utterly ruthless. Bump was all of those, with a greasy layer of sleaze smoothed on top like rancid frosting covering a moldy cake.

He leaned back on his gold-tipped cane, crossed one ankle in its furry boot over the other. Somehow even standing on the street across from a burning building he managed to look like he was lounging around his horrendous living room, perfectly relaxed, lord of his tacky pornography empire.

“Nobody in, aye?” Terrible asked. He stepped a little closer to her; just half a step, really, nothing anyone would notice, but she did, and it helped.

“Nay, ain’t none people in there, when it fuckin go. Only our fuckin supplies, yay? Fuckin only half got out, fore it blowin the fuck up.” He leered at her. “Too fuckin bad, yay? Got less smoke now, price goin up, Bump gots the guessing on. ’Course, could be you ain’t gotta get the fuckin raise, you helping Bump out, getting what we needing done up, yay?”

She didn’t answer him. Would not. He didn’t deserve an answer.

Instead she just watched the fire, watched Terrible’s profile silhouetted by it and the way it cast changing golden light on everything. Downside looked almost wholesome with the flames dancing in their enormous makeshift firecan; that same light softened the sharp edges, bleached out the blood and needles and filth, the passed-out bodies and pockmarked walls and broken streets. The fire smoothed it all over, made it look almost normal.

Funny, she’d never really noticed that before. But then she’d never really paid this much attention to a fire before, at least not one she wasn’t inside. Burning buildings were as common an occurrence in Downside as muggings and beatings; they no longer attracted much attention, save from scavengers looking for something to snatch from the wreckage.

After the fire finally died they’d swarm, and look for every scrap of metal, every bit of furniture, every smoke-damaged pipe. And of course, any lumps of Dream that might have survived. The thought caused a little pang in her heart. She could use a visit to the pipes just then. It would be nice to forget Bump’s beady eyes, his dismissal of her, the confidence with which he used her.

But that was the price she paid, and she knew that. So she squared her shoulders. “You don’t have any idea who could have told? Who knew the place would be empty?”

“Terrible an meself, coursens. An a some they others. They needed for fuckin clearin up, dig, movin fuckin furniture. Movin them fuckin Dream out, yay. They Bump gots fuckin trust for.”

“So who could they have told?”

Bump shrugged. “Ain’t shoulda given none the fuckin tell, yay? Bump’s business Bump’s own fuckin business. Ain’t for nobody givin out.”

“Well, clearly someone you trust isn’t really someone you should be trusting,” she said without thinking, and regretted it when Terrible glanced at her. He did it fast, just a quick cut of his eyes in her direction and then away again, but she saw it. She felt it.

It was starting already. She wished she could say she was surprised, wished she hadn’t been waiting for it, expecting it the way she expected rain from black clouds overhead. Nothing in the world was permanent, especially not happiness.

She’d always known that. She just wished life would stop proving her right.