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# DIRTY MAGIC

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# DIRTY MAGIC

JAYE WELLS

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[\*\*Begin Reading\*\*](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[A Preview of \*Strange Fates\*](#)

[Orbit Newsletter](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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*For Mom, the original kick-ass chick.*

## Chapter One



It was just another fucked-up night in the Cauldron. Potion junkies huddled in shadowy corners with their ampoules and pipes and needles. The occasional flick of a lighter's flame illuminated their dirty, desperate faces, and the air sizzled with the ozone scent of spent magic.

I considered stopping to harass them. Arrest them for loitering and possession of illegal arcane substances. But they'd just be back on the street in a couple of days or be replaced by other dirty, desperate faces looking to escape the Mundane world.

Besides, these hard cases weren't my real targets. To make a dent, you had to go after the runners and stash boys, the potion cooks—the moneymen. The way I figured, better to hunt the vipers instead of the 'hood rats who craved the bite of their fangs. But for the last couple of weeks, the corner thugs had been laying low, staying off the streets after dark. My instincts were tingling, though, so I kept walking the beat, hoping to find a prize.

Near Canal Street, growls rolled out of a pitch-black alley. I stilled and listened with my hand on my hawthorn-wood nightstick. The sounds were like a feral dog protecting a particularly juicy bone. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled, and my nostrils twitched from the coppery bite of blood.

Approaching slowly, I removed the flashlight from my belt. The light illuminated about ten feet into the alley's dark throat. On the nearest wall, a graffitied dragon marked the spot as the Sanguinarian Coven's turf. But I already knew the east side of town belonged to the Sangs. That's one of the reasons I'd requested it for patrol. I didn't dare show my face on the Votary Coven's west-side territory.

Something moved in the shadows, just outside of the light's halo. A loud slurping sound. A wet moan.

"Babylon PD!" I called, taking a few cautious steps forward. The stink of blood intensified. "Come out with your hands up!"

The scuttling sound of feet against trash. Another growl, but no response to my order.

Three more steps expanded my field of vision. The light flared on the source of the horrible sounds and the unsettling scents.

A gaunt figure huddled over the prone form of a woman. Wet, stringy hair shielded her face, and every inch of her exposed skin glistened red with blood. My gun was in my hand faster than I could yell, “Freeze!”

Still partially in shadow, the attacker—male, judging from the size—swung around. I had the impression of glinty, yellow eyes and shaggy hair matted with blood.

“Step away with your hands up,” I commanded, my voice projected to make it a demand instead of a suggestion.

“Fuck you, bitch,” the male barked. And then he bolted.

“Shit!” I ran to the woman and felt for a pulse. I shouldn’t have been relieved not to find one, but it meant I was free to pursue the asshole who’d killed her.

My leg muscles burned and my heart raced. Through the radio on my shoulder I called Dispatch.

“Go ahead, Officer Prospero,” the dispatcher’s voice crackled through the radio.

“Be advised I need an ambulance sent to the alley off Canal and Elm. Interrupted a code twenty-seven. Victim had no pulse. I’m pursuing the perp on foot bearing east on Canal.”

“Ambulance is on its way. Backup unit will be there in five minutes. Keep us advised of your twenty.”

“Ten-four.” I took my finger off the comm button. “Shit, he’s fast.” I dug in, my air coming out in puffs of vapor in the cool night air.

He was definitely freaking—a strength or speed potion, probably. But that type of magic wouldn’t explain why he mauled that woman in the alley—or those yellow predator’s eyes. I tucked that away for the moment and focused on keeping up.

The perp loped through the maze of dark alleys and streets as if he knew the Cauldron well. But no one knew it better than I did, and I planned to be right behind him when he finally made a mistake.

As I ran, my lead cuffs clanked heavily against the wood of my nightstick. The rhythm matched the thumping beats of my heart and the air rasping from my lungs. I had a Glock at my side, but when perps are jacked up on potions, they’re almost unstoppable with Mundane weaponry unless you deliver a fatal shot. Killing him wasn’t my goal—I wanted the notch on my arrest stats.

“Stop or I’ll salt you!” I pulled the salt flare from my left side. The best way to incapacitate a hexhead was to use a little of the old sodium chloride.

A loud snarling grunt echoed back over his shoulder. He picked up the pace, but he wasn’t running blind. No, he was headed someplace specific.

“Prospero,” Dispatch called through the walkie. “Backup is on its way.”

“Copy. The vic?”

“Ambulance arrived and confirmed death. ME is on his way to make it official.”

I looked around to get my bearings. He veered right on Mercury Street. “The suspect appears to be headed for the Arteries,” I spoke into the communicator. “I’m pursuing.”

“Copy that, Officer Prospero. Be advised you are required to wait for backup before entering the tunnels.” She told me their coordinates.

I cursed under my breath. They were still five blocks away and on foot.

A block or so ahead I could see one of the boarded-up gates that led down into the old subway tunnels. The system had been abandoned fifty years earlier, before the

project was anywhere close to completion. Now the tunnels served as a rabbit warren for potion addicts wanting to chase the black dragon in the rat-infested, shit-stench darkness.

In front of the gate, a large wooden sign announced the site as the FUTURE HOME OF THE CAULDRON COMMUNITY CENTER. Under those words was the logo for Volos Real Estate Development, which did nothing to improve my mood.

If Speedy made it through that gate, we'd never find him. The tunnels would swallow him in one gulp. My conscience suddenly sounded a lot like Captain Eldritch in my head: *Don't be an idiot, Kate. Wait for backup.*

I hadn't run halfway through the Cauldron only to lose the bastard to the darkness. But I knew better than to enter the tunnels alone. The captain had laid down that policy after a rookie ended up as rat food five years earlier. So I wasn't going to follow him there, but I could still slow him down a little. Buy some time for backup to arrive.

The salt flare's thick double barrel was preloaded with two rock-salt shells. A bite from one of those puppies was rarely lethal, but it was enough to dilute the effects of most potions, as well as cause enough pain to convince perps to lie down and play dead. The only catch was, you had to be within twenty feet for the salt to interrupt the magic. The closer, the better if you wanted the bonus of severe skin abrasions.

The runner was maybe fifteen feet from me and a mere ten from the gate that represented his freedom. Time to make the move. I stopped running and took aim.

*Exhale. Squeeze. Boom!*

Rock salt exploded from the gun in a starburst. Some of the rocks pinged off the gate's boards and metal fittings. The rest embedded in the perp's shirtless back like shrapnel. Small red pockmarks covered the dirty bare skin not covered with tufts of dark hair. He stumbled, but he didn't stay down.

Instead, he leaped up the gate and his hands grasped the top edge. A narrow opening between the gate and the upper concrete stood between him and freedom.

"Shit!" Frustration and indecision made my muscles yearn for action. My only choice was to take him down.

Speedy already had his head and an arm through the opening at the top of the gate. I surged up and grabbed his ankles. Lifted my feet to help gravity do its job. We slammed to the ground and rolled all asses and elbows through the dirt and grass and broken potion vials.

The impact momentarily stunned us both. My arm stung where the glass shards had done their worst, but the pain barely registered through the heady rush of adrenaline.

Speedy exploded off the ground with a growl. I jumped after him, my grip tight on the salt flare. I still had one shell left, not that I expected it to do much good after seeing the first one had barely fazed him. In my other hand, I held a small canister of S&P spray. "BPD! You're under arrest!"

The beast barely looked human. His hair was long and matted in some patches, which alternated with wide swaths of pink scalp—as if he'd been infected with mange. The lower half of his face was covered in a shaggy beard. The pale skin around his yellow eyes and mouth was red and raw. His teeth were crooked and sharp. Too large for his mouth to corral. Hairy shoulders almost touched his ears like a dog with his hackles up.

If he understood my command he didn't show it. That intense yellow gaze focused on my right forearm where a large gash oozed blood. His too-red lips curled back into a snarl.

I aimed the canister of salt-and-pepper spray. The burning mixture of saline and capsicum hit him between the eyes. He blinked, sneezed. Wiped a casual hand across his face. No screaming. No red, watery eyes or swollen mucus glands.

His nostrils flared and he lowered his face to sniff the air closer to me. His yellow eyes stayed focused on my wound. An eager red tongue caressed those sharp teeth in anticipation.

For the first time, actual fear crept like ice tendrils up the back of my neck. What kind of fucked-up potion was this guy on?

I don't remember removing the Glock from my belt. I don't remember pointing it at the perp's snarling face. But I remember shouting, "Stop or I'll shoot!"

One second the world was still except for the pounding of my heart and the cold fear clawing my gut. The next, his wrecking-ball weight punched my body to the ground. My legs flew up and my back crashed into the metal gate. Hot breath escaped my panicked lungs. His body pinned me to the metal bars.

Acrid breath on my face. Body odor and unwashed skin everywhere. An erect penis pressed into my hip. But my attacker wasn't interested in sex. He was aroused by something else altogether—blood. My blood.

My fear.

The next instant, his teeth clamped over the bleeding wound. Pain blasted up my arm like lightning. Sickening sucking sounds filled the night air. Fear burst like a blinding light in my brain. "Fuck!"

The perp pulled me toward the ground and pinned me. The impact knocked the weapon from my hand, but it only lay a couple feet away. I reached for it with my left hand. But fingers can stretch only so far no matter how much you yearn and curse and pray.

The pain was like needles stabbing my vein. My vision swam. If I didn't stop him soon, I'd pass out. If that happened he'd drag me into those tunnels and no one would see me again.

Fortunately, elbows make excellent motivators. Especially when they're rammed into soft temples. At least they usually are. In this case, my bloodthirsty opponent was too busy feasting on my flesh and blood to react. Finally, in a desperate move, I bucked my hips like a wild thing. He lost contact with my arm just long enough for me to roll a few centimeters closer to my target.

I reared up, grabbed the gun, and pivoted.

The pistol's mouth kissed his cheek a split second before it removed his face.

Backup arrived thirty seconds too late.

## Chapter Two



I limped into the precinct a couple hours later. A huge white bandage glared from my right forearm and a black eye throbbed on my face. My blood-soaked uniform had been confiscated by the team that arrived shortly after my tardy backup to investigate the shooting. They'd also taken my service weapon, salt flare, S&P spray canister, and shoes. Which left me feeling naked despite the blue scrubs I'd been issued by the wizard medics.

After sewing up my arm in the back of an ambulance while I'd answered the shoot team's questions, the wizard had slammed a syringe full of saline and antibiotics into my ass. The shoot team had waited until they'd gotten a good eyeful of my rear bumper before they declared me free to go. I knew better than to believe I wouldn't be hearing from them again. Especially after they'd warned me to stay within Babylon city limits.

I'd just dropped by the precinct to grab my things before heading home. I'd called my neighbor, Baba, from the ambulance to let her know I'd be later than usual. She'd said it was no problem staying late to keep an eye on Danny. Luckily, she'd been too wrapped up in the show she'd been watching to question me about the reason for the overtime. If I were even luckier neither she nor my brother would notice the bandage on my arm when they saw me, but it would take a miracle to miss the black eye.

My feet felt like they were encased in lead boots instead of flip-flops as I made my way toward the locker room. I caught my reflection in the glass of one of the interrogation rooms and cringed. My one good eye looked unnaturally blue next to its swollen purple twin. I'd managed to get all the smears off my face, but my brunette hair was still matted in spots with Speedy's blood. I needed a hot shower and a stiff drink—preferably at the same time. But first—

"Prospero, get your ass in here!" Captain Eldritch yelled from his doorway. The entire squad room went silent as cops paused to gape at the unfolding drama.

With a heavy sigh, I dropped my duffel bag at my desk and performed the walk of shame. My colleagues didn't bother to cover their curious stares and smirks. For the next few hours, this scene would be replayed and analyzed around the watercooler along with the leaked details of the shooting. Cops were worse than housewives when

it came to gossip.

“Sit down.” Stress lines permanently bracketed Eldritch’s mouth. His baldpate glowed dully under the harsh fluorescent lights. The desk hid a paunch that betrayed a lifelong love affair with fried dough, but one would be unwise to mistake his generous midsection for a sign of weakness. He’d maneuvered his way up from patrolman to captain in a criminal justice system rife with political intrigue and bureaucratic red tape. For his efforts, he was rumored to be next in line for chief of the entire BPD. In other words, he was not a man to piss off.

“I won’t bother asking if you’re all right because I can see you are. Instead, I’ll begin by asking what the fuck you thought you were doing?”

“Sir, I—”

He slashed a hand through the air. “Don’t bother. You weren’t thinking. Not a damned thing. That’s the only explanation that makes any sense. Because I know you were trained better than to enter a dangerous confrontation with a hexed-out suspect without backup.”

“If I’d waited for backup that bastard would be running free through the Arteries.”

“Thanks to you he’s not going to be running anywhere ever again.”

I leaned forward, my hands up in a pleading gesture. “It was a clean kill, sir.” If you could call blowing someone’s face off “clean.”

He sat back and crossed his arms over his gut. He hit me with his best cop glare—the same one I used on suspects until they broke under the oppressive weight of silence. But I wasn’t a criminal—not anymore, anyway—and I knew I’d done the right thing. In fact, if I had to do it over again I would have made the same call.

“Even if I’d waited for backup the outcome would have been the same.” I looked right in his eyes. “He was immune to every defensive charm I tried. There was no stopping him without lethal force.”

The captain scrubbed a hand over his face and sat up. His chair creaked in protest. “Christ, Prospero. Damned if I wouldn’t have done the same thing.” I opened my mouth to ask why I was getting the riot act if that was the case, but he held up a hand to stall my arguments. “Be that as it may, since this case involved deadly force, the rules dictate that I put you on suspension pending an investigation of the incident.”

My mouth dropped open. “But—”

“There’s not a damned thing I can do about it, so don’t waste your breath. We got bigger issues to discuss.”

I shook my head at him. Forcing a cop to take leave after the use of deadly force was standard procedure, but I wasn’t about to sit on the sidelines with a new lethal potion on the streets. Still, the look in his eyes told me arguing would only prolong the suspension.

“The ME identified your perp.” The lightning-fast change in topic nearly gave me whiplash.

“And?” I frowned.

“His name was Ferris Harkins.” The female voice surprised me from the doorway.

I swiveled to see a tall woman in a smart navy pantsuit. Her brown hair was cut in a no-nonsense bob. The lines between her brows told me they were used to frowning, and the steel in her gaze hinted at a razor-blade tongue. She wore her watch on her right wrist and her briefcase was clutched in that same hand. Whoever she was, she

was definitely a Lefty—just like me.

I glanced back at Eldritch. He didn't look surprised by the new arrival so much as resigned to it. He pasted his best politician smile on his lips and rose to shake her hand. "I was about to inform Officer Prospero of your interest in the case."

"That's a diplomatic way to phrase it, Captain." She turned to me. "Special Agent Miranda Gardner."

I frowned at her. "Which agency?"

She smiled tightly. "MEA."

Something heavy bounced off the base of my stomach. If the Magic Enforcement Agency was involved, things were about to get... complicated.

After a moment's hesitation, I rose and offered her my left hand. I usually offered my right to Mundanes to avoid awkwardness, but she offered me her left, which confirmed she was an Adept.

Her handclasp was brief but firm enough to tell me she meant business. When I looked down at our hands, I noticed a cabochon ring on her middle finger.

"Nice ring," I said. "Tigereye?"

She nodded and pulled her hand away. "The stone of truth and logic."

And she wore it on her Saturn finger—the finger of responsibility and security—which meant she wanted a boost in those areas. Interesting.

She tipped her chin at my wrist. "And your tattoo—Ouroboros?"

I placed my right hand over my wrist, as if the snake might jump off my skin otherwise. "A youthful transgression," I said in a flippant tone that disguised the massive understatement it really was.

Eldritch cleared his throat. I looked up to see Gardner watching me with a too-wise gaze. Either she already knew the snake swallowing its own tail was the emblem of the Votary Coven or she merely smelled the lie on me. Time to change the subject.

"Why is the MEA interested in Ferris Harkins?" I glanced at Eldritch, but he looked away.

"What your captain was about to tell you before I interrupted," Gardner said, "is that the man you killed tonight was an MEA informant."

I closed my eyes. "Fuck. Me."

"Funny, that's exactly what I said when his name popped up on ACD two hours ago as deceased."

ACD stood for the Arcane Crime Database, a federal clearinghouse of all magic-related criminal activity in the country. Actually, that's not entirely true. ACD just kept track of the illegal dirty magic. The corporate labs that produced legal, "clean" magical products, aka Big Magic, bought their legitimacy through lobbyist bribes and the generous tax revenue they generated for Uncle Sam.

I opened my eyes. "Were you aware when you recruited him that he was a hexhead with a hard-on for murder?"

"He wasn't a hexhead when we recruited him." She handed over a picture of a male. Mid-twenties, scruffy with a hardness to his gaze that hinted at life on the street, but no noticeable signs of magic use—dilated pupils, scabs, etc. A far cry from the gaunt, savage creature I'd killed. A scribbled date at the bottom told me the picture had been taken a week earlier.

"Are you sure we're talking about the same guy?"

“Positive. I’ve just come from IDing the body.”

Usually potions took several months—sometimes years—of heavy use to transform normal people into freaks and monsters. “You expect me to believe a potion turned this guy”—I held up the picture—“into the beast I shot in less than a week?”

She removed her cell from her briefcase and flashed another picture. This one was taken at the morgue. There wasn’t enough face left to compare so it was impossible to use that to verify whether the identity matched the first shot. But then Gardner tapped the image to indicate a tattoo of a skull with the words *Et in Arcadia ego* underneath on the dead man’s left wrist.

Frowning, I lifted the old picture again. Sure enough, the same tattoo was on Ferris Harkins’s “before” picture. “The tattoo’s the same. But that’s hardly conclusive.”

“True. However, as you’ll see in the file, the identity was also confirmed through fingerprints.”

I blew out a deep sigh. “Okay, so how did this guy”—I held up the first shot—“end up like this?” I held up a screen shot from the file that had been taken from my vest cam. In it Harkins looked like something from hell: a wild-eyed hellhound with bloodstained teeth.

“Four days ago, we sent Harkins to do a buy,” explained Gardner. “He was supposed to meet up with one of my agents an hour later but never showed. We’ve been looking for him since. At first we figured he ran off with the buy money, but then this.” She motioned vaguely at me as if I was the *this* in question.

My mouth fell open. “You gave a CI cash and then set him loose in the Cauldron? What the fuck did you think was going to happen?”

“Prospero,” Eldritch warned.

“Sorry,” I grumbled. “But what was the MEA doing setting up a buy in the Cauldron to begin with? And why didn’t we know about it?”

“Forgive me, Officer,” Gardner said, laughing. “I wasn’t aware the federal government had to ask your permission to run investigations in Babylon.”

I crossed my arms and sucked at my teeth to prevent more expletives from escaping. Eldritch wouldn’t meet my eyes at all—so much for support from that quarter.

“Your actions tonight have complicated the shit out of my case,” Gardner continued.

“Seems like you complicated it yourself when you lost your snitch, Special Agent.”

Her eyes narrowed, but she didn’t rise to the bait. “A few weeks ago, one of our agents working undercover in Canada reported that an illegal shipment of antimony was being sent to Babylon.”

Antimony is a common metalloid used in everything from cosmetics to the treatment of constipation to the manufacturing of ceramics. Gardner’s mention of a shipment was notable, however, because the element was also used in a lot of potions. In fact, it was so commonly used in alchemy that the government had started regulating its sale a decade earlier to try to limit street wizes’ access to it.

“I don’t suppose they gave you a delivery address?” I asked in a dry tone.

Gardner’s lips pressed together. Guess she wasn’t a fan of sarcasm. “No, but we got our team in place shortly after and have been watching things since. About a week

ago, Captain Eldritch called to tell us there had been a couple of unusual assaults.”

“Nothing like what happened tonight, but pretty violent,” Eldritch said. “The victims had each been bitten multiple times.”

“Why didn’t you put it in the debriefing reports?” I demanded.

His face hardened at my challenge. “I didn’t want to alarm anyone unnecessarily.”

I swallowed my retort. If I had to bet, Eldritch hadn’t made the report official because then his precinct would have gotten some unwanted attention from the chief and the mayor, who was up for reelection. “So you told the MEA instead?”

“Ever since Abraxas went to Crowley, the MEA has been keeping an eye on Babylon,” Eldritch offered, “waiting to see who would step up to fill the power vacuum.”

I snorted. “No one would be dumb enough to do that while Uncle Abe’s still alive.” As I spoke I kept a careful eye on Gardner to see her reaction to my casually claiming Abraxas Prospero as kin. She didn’t even blink, which meant she’d known who I was before she walked into that room. Part of me was relieved not to have to explain the connection or how I’d walked away from Uncle Abe and his coven a decade earlier. In fact, the last time I’d seen him was when I watched his trial on TV with the rest of the city. During the testimony, he’d smiled at the camera like he’d been savoring a juicy secret. I shivered, shaking off the memory.

“So you figure whoever ordered that antimony is trying at least to consolidate the Votaries.” I crossed my arms and tried to sort through all the angles.

*Votary* is another name for wizards who specialize in an alchemical form of dirty magic. In the dirty magic food chain, Votaries are at the top, followed by the Os, who specialize in sex magic, and the Sanguinarians, who deal in dirty blood potions.

“That’s one of our theories.” Gardner was watching me carefully now that she knew I had criminal blood in my veins.

It had been five years since Abe earned his all-expenses-paid trip to Crowley Penitentiary. Before his downfall, he’d been the grand wizard of the Votary Coven and the godfather who’d kept all the other covens in line. Once he was behind bars, no one had the balls to come forward and declare themselves the new kings of the Cauldron, so the covens splintered, which resulted in lots of turf battles. If Eldritch and Gardner were right about someone’s trying to make a power play, we were looking at a lot more dead bodies piling up before this was all said and done. But that was a pretty huge *if*.

“Antimony has lots of uses besides alchemy, Special Agent.”

She crossed her arms and smirked at me. “That’s true, I suppose. But we’ve checked the official shipment manifests of every freighter that’s come into Babylon in the last month. No shipments of antimony showed up. That means whoever received it was trying to keep it off the record.”

“Look, even if you’re right and the antimony was used in the potion Harkins was on,” I countered, “it doesn’t mean we’re looking at consolidation of power. It could just be a new wiz who wants to make his mark.”

“You could be right.” She nodded. “That’s one of the reasons we sent Harkins to make a buy. We were hoping that once we knew who was dealing the potion we could convince them to flip on the distributor.”

“But he got hooked before he could report back to you,” I said.

She nodded.

“What’s the potion called?”

Gardner exchanged a tense glance with Eldritch, who’d remained tellingly silent during the exchange. No doubt about it. Special Agent Gardner was in charge. “The street name is Gray Wolf.”

“Clever,” I said.

“Why?” Eldritch asked. He’d worked the Arcane beat for years, but he was still a Mundane. Sometimes the intricacies of the craft eluded him.

“The gray wolf is the alchemical symbol for antimony,” Gardner explained.

“Shit,” I said. “If this stuff takes off, we’re toast.” From what I’d seen, Gray Wolf created both immunity to defensive magic and a ravenous craving for human flesh. Plus it acted incredibly fast on the user’s body chemistry.

“And now that Harkins is dead, we’re back at square one,” Gardner said.

My stomach dipped. I didn’t regret killing Harkins, but I was sorry my actions made getting the potion off the streets more difficult. “How can I help?”

“Nothing beyond a detailed report on your altercation with Harkins. Maybe you saw something we can use.”

I nodded absently. “You mentioned that you thought Gray Wolf was alchemical. Does that mean you had a wizard analyze the ingredients?”

“Yes, off a blood sample we gathered at one of the crime scenes. But our team’s wizard has only had a chance to do preliminary tests.”

I chewed on my lip. I’d love to get my hands on that sample to figure out what made Harkins change so quickly. A new thought arrived hot on the heels of that one. “Wait, do you have any BPD officers on your task force?”

Since the 1980s, the MEA had been partnering with local police agencies by bringing local cops in on cases. It benefited the agency because it got access to locals who understood the dynamics of their cities, and the cops benefited because the MEA paid generous overtime. In other words, if they were hiring, I wanted in.

Gardner frowned at the change of subject. Then she exchanged a glance with Eldritch.

“I’m putting together a list of candidates,” he said, not meeting my eyes. Translation: I wasn’t on it.

“Look, I know you don’t know me from Adam,” I said. “But I’d love a chance to consult on this case.”

Her eyebrows rose at my audacity. When she didn’t laugh, I forged ahead.

“I was the last one to see Harkins alive”—I counted the reasons off on my fingers—“I grew up in the Cauldron, and, as we’ve already covered, I was raised in the Votary Coven.”

She glanced at Eldritch, who suddenly looked very uncomfortable. “Officer Prospero, I wouldn’t need extra bodies on my team at all if you hadn’t killed my star CI tonight.”

I snapped my mouth shut.

“She’s right, though,” Eldritch said, shocking the hell out of me. “She knows these streets. Plus, when you asked for that list you said you wanted Adepts. There are only a handful on the force.” Usually Adepts in law enforcement went the CSI route because of the lab work.

Gardner raised a brow. “So why wasn’t she on the list already?”

Eldritch glanced at me with an expression that put me on edge. “Leave us.”

“Sir, I—”

“Go.” His voice was quiet but held a thin edge of steel.

Gardner didn’t smile or send me any other sign of encouragement. “We’ll call you back.”

I shot Eldritch a pleading glance before I walked out the door. I was pretty sure Eldritch wanted me to leave so he could tell her I wasn’t ready for MEA-level work. After all, I was just a beat cop. Usually detectives and officers already members of special Arcane units got the sweet gigs on MEA task forces.

The other officers in the bull pen were doing a minimally convincing job of looking busy. But the instant I exited the office, the energy in the room shifted.

I crossed my arms and leaned against a metal desk. Inside the office, Eldritch was talking. Gardner listened with her arms crossed. Every muscle in my neck was so tight it cramped. The more I thought about my idea to join the team, the more I wanted it to happen.

Promotions were rare and incredibly competitive in the department. Thus far, I’d been told that my background in the covens wasn’t a factor in being passed up. Instead, the excuses were always that I fell a hair short of the top score on the test or that someone else was just more qualified. But with each missed opportunity, I grew more restless. After five years, busting hexheads and the occasional corner kid felt like playing Whac-a-Mole. But being on a task force would let me be where the real action was happening. I’d be going after the supply side of things—potion cookers and the coven wizards.

“Yo, Prospero?” A deep voice called from behind me. Guess the other cops got tired of watching and had decided to drum up some drama by shit-talking.

I ignored them and started chewing on my right thumbnail. Was Eldritch arguing for or against me? I couldn’t tell from Gardner’s body language, which hadn’t shifted at all.

“I heard you shot a guy in the dick,” another baritone called. “That true?”

“Why?” I didn’t turn around. “You want a demonstration?”

Male chortles echoed from the break room nearby. The swoosh and thump from the potion vending machine hinted that one of my colleagues was helping himself to a late-night energy potion. I always found it ironic how many cops justified using clean magic to fight the dirty kind. Then again, most cops weren’t Adept, so it was easier to compartmentalize magic into a good camp and an evil one. Black versus white, legal versus illegal. Hell, the Big Magic corporations claimed their government-sanctioned potions weren’t even addictive, which they “proved” using studies they themselves had funded. But anyone who cooked potions could tell you the line between the two was little more than vapor. Whether you used it with good intentions or ill, magic was magic, and instead of being black or white, most of it was smoke-screen gray.

Just then, Gardner’s head swiveled and she stared right at me through the window. I met her gaze without flinching. Whatever Eldritch had just told her put that speculative gleam in her eyes.

Movement behind me. One of the knuckleheads decided he’d bring the bullshit to me instead of yelling across the room.

“Did you really chase the guy into the Arteries?”

I turned to see Officer Michael Hanson. He was nice-enough-looking for an idiot. While I got a lot of BS from my colleagues for being an Adept, most grudgingly accepted that I was decent at my job; Hanson always found a way to remind me that magic made me an outsider. Ironic since his utility belt was weighed down by enough protection amulets to choke a dragon.

“No,” I snapped.

“That’s too bad.” He took a too-casual sip from his can of Excalibur, the most popular brand of energy potion.

I frowned up at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged. “Just figured you’d feel at home down there with all the other Sinisters.”

*Sinister* was derogatory slang for someone born with a genetic predisposition to do magic. A lot of cops didn’t trust any Adepts, period, because they didn’t believe anyone could wield magic without being corrupted by its power. Plus, since laws made any evidence gathered through arcane means inadmissible in court, a lot of cops didn’t want any Adepts on their teams because they didn’t trust us to do things by the book. Therefore, as an Adept cop who had grown up in a coven led by a known criminal mastermind, I was doubly damned in the eyes of bigots like Hanson. So I’d gotten used to being called everything from “Lefty” to the middle-of-the-road “Gauche” to my personal favorite, “Freakshow.”

I pinned him with a pitying glare. “That the best you got?”

His eye flared at the challenge. “No, this is.” His hand cupped his balls.

“According to Alice in Dispatch”—I lowered my gaze to his crotch and winced—“there ain’t much magical about that wand.”

In addition to being a prejudiced dick, Hanson also had a fetish for Adept chicks like Alice. He’d never hit on me, which told me he had either some sort of intelligence or at least a healthy sense of self-preservation.

His face went pale and then flared red. Heavy silence loomed in the background where the peanut gallery looked on.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m kind of in the middle of something.” I turned back to the window and dismissed him altogether.

“Bitch,” he muttered and stormed away.

Inside the office, Gardner was standing with her back to the window. Her shoulders and head obscured my view of the captain’s face. Whatever was being said, it was clear they were wrapping up.

A loud racket behind me sounded like Hanson kicking a chair. I was saved from having to turn and face the disapproving looks of my colleagues when Gardner opened the door. She walked out without sparing me a glance. I rose slowly, watching her go. I wanted to call out and ask what was going on, but pride prevented it. I did, however, notice a thick folder tucked under her arm.

Eldritch came to the door. “Prosper—” The yell cut off when he saw me standing ten feet away. He shot me a look dripping in annoyance. “Come on.”

When I walked in, Eldritch’s expression gave me nothing to go on.

“Well?” I demanded, watching him for any hint of what was coming.

He blew out a breath and tossed a pen on his desktop. “She said she’d be in touch.”

My mouth fell open. “That’s it?”

He nodded and dropped into his chair. The overtaxed vinyl sighed in resignation.

“Was that my file she had?” I asked.

“I gave her the down and dirty, but she wanted time to review your performance records.”

I chewed on my lip. My record was pretty good despite the lack of promotions, so that wasn’t my concern. Instead, it was the background search she’d also find in there. “You told her about... everything?”

He took a sip of cold coffee and nodded. “Yep,” he said after he swallowed.

“And?”

He looked up with a warning glance. “And what, Officer?”

I relaxed my tense shoulders and tried to look contrite. “I’m sorry, sir. I’m just trying to figure out if I have a chance at the task force.”

He grimaced and sat back in his chair. “If it makes you feel better, she didn’t seem scandalized that you’re related to half the coven members in the Cauldron.”

I let out a relieved breath.

“But,” he continued, “I also told her you’re a pain in the ass.”

I tilted my head but didn’t take the bait. “I doubt that scandalized her, either.”

“True enough.” Eldritch chuckled, but then he blew out a deep breath. “You want my advice?”

I didn’t but nodded anyway.

“Go home and get some rest. You look like hell.”

## Chapter Three



Tinny music and rapid beeping greeted me the next morning when I stumbled into the kitchen. The morning news droned from the small countertop TV near the fridge. Danny didn't look up from his battle against zombies or mutant ninjas or whatever foe the kids were killing these days. A snack cake hung from his lips and an open soda on the table revealed his idea of a nutritious breakfast.

"We're out of milk," he murmured around the mouthful of refined sugar.

"Good morning to you, too, Sunshine." Opening the fridge, I removed the carton of milk I'd grabbed on my way home from the precinct the night before. My hand slammed it on the table next to his soda, and my hip shoved his dirty gym shoes to the floor. "And how many times have I told you shoes don't belong on the table?"

He looked up then. "Hey! What happened to your eye?"

I cringed. After sleeping like the undead, I'd totally forgotten about the shiner. I chuckled and shrugged it off. "It's nothing."

"Right," he snorted. "If I came home with a black eye like that you'd call out the National Guard."

I paused because he was right. A lot of my overprotectiveness was a hangover from the violence I'd seen as a kid, but Danny's fears for me were justified given that my job required me to wear weaponry. He deserved some sort of explanation.

"No biggie. Got it from a perp who didn't want to be arrested."

He eyed me suspiciously and I was suddenly thankful the long sleeves of my ratty, green chenille robe hid the bandage. "Well, did you get to use the salt-cannon on him?" Danny was always fascinated by the salt charms I used in the line of duty.

"I did," I said, leaving out the bullet I'd also used. I rummaged in the fridge for breakfast but came up uninspired. Eyeing the box of snack cakes, I decided they weren't so bad. Cake had eggs and milk, right? Plus they went really well with coffee.

Luckily, the perky news anchor's voice covered the damning crinkle of cellophane.

"Last night Mayor Owens hosted a fund-raiser for his reelection campaign." The TV flashed a shot of the mayor's five-hundred-watt politician smile and polished suit. His eyes were too bright and his skin had the too-smooth texture that could be achieved only through expensive, clean magic elixirs. "Babylon real estate developer

and major contributor to the mayor's campaign, John Volos was also in attendance at the event." The image jump-cut to one of the mayor glad-handing a disgustingly handsome man in a tux that cost more than most people made in a month.

I tried not to choke on the suddenly dry mouthful of cake.

Unlike Mayor Owens's elector-granted influence and potion-bought looks, the charisma and power radiating from John Volos existed on a chromosomal level. Even when we'd been kids, he'd been a force of nature.

The screen switched to tape of Volos smoldering into the camera, a perky redhead on his arm. "I'm proud to put my support behind Mayor Owens. He's done so much to encourage the redevelopment of the Cauldron, which is an issue close to my heart."

"What heart?" I snorted.

"Huh?" Danny murmured.

"Nothing."

He looked up and saw the TV screen. "Hey! It's John."

I slapped the off button with more power than I'd intended. The TV jumped and the screen went black.

"Jeez, what crawled up your butt today?"

"Finish your breakfast."

He rolled his eyes and pulled the earphones down. I glared at the screen for a few seconds behind Danny's back, but a honk from the curb outside tore me away from my foul mood.

I nudged Danny. "Move it, kid."

He grimaced and looked up like I'd just interrupted him performing important surgery.

"Pen's out front," I added.

Penelope Griffin was my best friend. When we'd met we'd both been waitresses at a crappy chain restaurant while we worked our ways through college. I'd been earning my night-school degree in criminal justice while she worked toward her master's in school counseling. Now she was a counselor at Meadowlake, the exclusive prep school Danny attended. Without her recommendation to the school board, I never would have gotten him away from Babylon's public prison-yard schools. Luckily, Pen also had worked a favor from the finance office for a small discount on the astronomical tuition.

Danny nodded and jumped out of his chair. While I went to the back door and waved at Pen, he scrambled to shove his books into his knapsack.

"What's up with the eye?" she called, leaning across the passenger seat.

"Long story."

"I'll come over tonight for a beer and you can fill me in, okay?"

I nodded just as Danny brushed by me. "Have a good day!" I called in my best impersonation of June Cleaver.

This earned me a grunt. After Danny was in the car with his face buried in the game again, Pen pulled away.

I was turning to go back inside when a "Yoo-hoo" caught my attention. Glancing toward the house next door, I saw Baba limping across her front yard. Her long, gray hair flowed around her angular face and all the way down to her rear end, which was covered in the world's ugliest housecoat. Her last name was Nowiki, but her real first

name was kind of a neighborhood mystery since she insisted we all call her “Baba.” Depending on whom you asked, the Polish word meant either “grandmother” or “witch.” I’d never seen any kids running around her house, but I had seen Baba dancing around her backyard under a full moon. Naked.

Witches are members of the Mundane pagan religions who use the rituals of magic to worship deities. Their magic could be strong—especially in groups—but not nearly as powerful or useful as the magic used by well-trained Adepts, who are able to harness energies that Mundanes can’t access. It’s kind of how a housewife uses ingredients in her kitchen to create a decent meal. The same items in the hands of a trained chef become culinary art.

I crossed the yard to meet Baba halfway.

“What the hell have you done to yourself? Look at ya!” she said by way of greeting. “Is that a black eye? And what’s with the bandage?” She reached for the edge of my sleeve to see more, but I shied away.

“Just had a little run-in with a reluctant criminal.” I shrugged. “No biggie.”

She crossed her arms over her flat chest. “Did ya throw the book at the bastard?”

I bit my lip to hide the smile. “Something like that.”

Cops shows were Baba’s favorite things in the world. That’s why it was always so easy to convince her to babysit Danny when I had the late shift. Her meager retirement income meant luxuries like cable television weren’t an option. So she hung out at my place most nights watching TV cops strut around saying things like, “This time it’s personal,” and “I’ll have your badge for that!”

“Thanks for keeping an eye on Danny last night until I got home.” When I’d arrived the night before, she had been snoring on the couch. I’d gently woken her up and helped her home, but we hadn’t talked much since she was only half-awake. “Happy to.” She waved a gnarled hand. “The crime channel was having a marathon of *Blue Devils* anyway.”

*Blue Devils* was her favorite show. It was about a ragtag team of vice cops who alternately killed and fucked their way through every investigation while narrowly dodging Internal Affairs. I’d never admit it out loud, but I’d watched a late-night episode or twelve and it was pretty good in a totally inaccurate and trashy way.

“Still,” I said, “I appreciate it.”

“Look, Kate, I am happy to help out and all—you know that.” She lowered her beer and squinted at me. “Hanging out with the kid is nice and I enjoying being able to watch my stories.”

I nodded, bracing myself for the *but*.

“But don’t you think it’s about time you let Danny stay here alone?”

My stomach clenched. “No.”

“Kate,” she began in a patient tone, “he’s old enough not to need a sitter. He’s what? Fifteen?”

“Sixteen on Thursday,” I corrected.

“Old enough not to need an old biddy like me hanging around. Hell, if something happened he’d be taking care of me!”

That was a lie and we both knew it. Baba might be old, but she could be meaner than a polecat when crossed. I’d seen her wield that cane at everyone from the mailman for running over her petunias to a Jehovah’s Witness who tried to save her