

SHAKE YOUR BOO THANG



CHLOE ARCHER

SHAKE YOUR BOO THANG

A PARANORMAL MM ROMANCE

EXORSQUAD

BOOK 7

CHLOE ARCHER

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**SHAKE YOUR
BOO THANG**



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SHAKE YOUR BOO THANG: A PARANORMAL MM ROMANCE

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DEDICATION

To all those I've lost.

To Mom, who supported my love of reading and writing—and never told me I couldn't become an author.

To Linda, for sparking my love of the strange and unusual.

*To Grandma, for making me fall in love with the magical realms books could take me to from the moment you read *Adventures of the Wishing Chair* by Enid Blyton to me as a child.*

May we meet again one day, beyond the Veil.

By then, I should have plenty more zany and funny stories to tell you all.

Wait for me.

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WELCOME TO SHAKE YOUR BOO THANG

Thank you so much for picking up *Shake Your Boo Thang*.

This book is intended for an adult audience and contains content that may be upsetting for some readers.

Compared to some of the other books in the series, this one is downright fluffy! However, content warnings include but are not limited to deaths of characters and/or their loved ones in the past, ghosts who want justice, arson, gambling addiction, and discussion of and trauma around a near death experience in the past.

Thanks again for giving this book a chance and I hope you enjoy Callum and Beau's story!

Chloe Archer

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EXORSQUAD LTD. EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT

CONGRATULATIONS! You have been selected to join ExorSquad, the UK's premier (and only) spectral extraction service.

By signing below, you acknowledge and agree to the following terms:

1 Handbook Compliance: You have received your copy of *The ExorSquad Handbook*. It is your comprehensive guide to not dying (probably). Failure to read, memorise, and follow all 500+ rules therein is your own bloody problem.

2 Assumption of Risk: You understand that spectral extraction is an inherently dangerous profession. ExorSquad Ltd., its owner (Gerald Pickett), and all associated staff accept **NO LIABILITY** for death, injury, possession, dismemberment, spontaneous combustion, ectoplasmic poisoning, temporal displacement, or "other unfortunate circumstances arising from contact with the deceased." By signing this contract, you waive your right (and your family's) to sue ExorSquad Ltd. for any reason, including reasons not yet invented.

3 Equipment Responsibility: You are responsible for all issued equipment, including but not limited to: one (1) X5000 Turbo Pro Plasma Accelerator™, one (1) torch, one (1) high-visibility jacket, and 100g of salt. Loss or damage will be deducted from wages.

4 Payment Terms: Minimum wage, no negotiation. Possible commission-based bonuses. You get paid when the ghost goes away. No ghost removal = no pay. Management reserves the right to dispute whether the ghost has, in fact, gone away.

5 Non-Disclosure: You agree not to discuss the confidential business practices of ExorSquad Ltd. with any living persons, dead persons, law enforcement, journalists, or your mum.

Addendum #1 - Grave Disturbance: Following a recent incident involving cursed remains, a vengeful non-witch, and one operative sustaining serious spinal injuries after being flung into an apple tree, employees are expressly forbidden from digging up graves, tombs, burial mounds, or any other resting place of the deceased. This includes (but is not limited to) cursed burial sites, haunted churchyards, and "that one suspicious patch of ground that definitely looks like someone's buried there." Handbook Rule #243 is **not** a suggestion. ExorSquad accepts no liability for employees who ignore this clause and end up incorporated into cursed ground themselves.

Addendum #2 - Fixtures and Fittings: I hereby indemnify ExorSquad Ltd and the employer Gerald Pickett from any and all damages to or by the contracted Spirit Extraction Expert (TM), including but not limited to lamps, chandeliers and other light fittings falling on heads, bookcases landing on bodies, cups, plates, saucers, cutlery, pots and pans and other kitchen goods being thrown at said employee, garden stakes impaling chests, trees colliding with skulls, and any and all other damages that may be incurred on or near the premises of a haunting ('near' being, for the purposes of the contract, within one thousand miles).

Addendum #3 - What did I tell you about digging up graves? I cannot believe this needs to be said twice, but do not disturb grave sites. Ever. For Pete's sake.

Addendum #4 - ExorSquad employees are strictly forbidden to get in touch with rival ghost hunting companies (who shall not be named!!) or create their own with the knowledge they have gathered during their time with ExorSquad. Any breach of this clause will result in being asked to

refund all expenses related to the contract (including salaries paid) and/or possibly being haunted by ghosts faithful to ExorSquad. (You do not want to meet Oswald the Licker. Trust me.)

Addendum #5 - Don't sing on the job: It recently came to light that singing when on the job, especially songs about ghosts, can personally offend many spirits. Some consider it cultural appropriation, and others take offence at having their peace disturbed, but the result of angering a ghost by song can end in death. From now on, please refrain and if you really must, then whistle or hum only.

Addendum #6 - When in doubt, get the hell out: In light of the recent permanent closure of Arduin Castle and the near-death experience of one of our own, employees hereby acknowledge that running for their lives is the recommended approach to any entity powerful enough to be classified as "absolutely not our problem." Failure to flee the premises immediately voids all company liability, insurance coverage, and sympathy. If you choose to act the hero and stand your ground, you do so at your own bloody risk, and ExorSquad is not responsible for any injuries resulting from incorrect use of our cutting-edge equipment. You may not sue, complain, or haunt management afterward. Nor will we reimburse therapy bills, funeral costs, or replacement trousers.

**THIS IS A 100% GENUINE, LEGALLY BINDING CONTRACT.
PLEASE READ CAREFULLY BEFORE SIGNING.**

Employee Signature:

Callum Fraser

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CHAPTER ONE



RULE #3: THE RULE OF THREES

Trouble often comes in threes. The worse the haunting, the more serious this becomes. Keep three in mind when investigating potential entity phenomena. Let's just say, the number three is no coincidence when it comes to the paranormal.

For instance:

One knock? Could just be a drafty old house.

Two knocks? If it isn't a human at the door, watch your back.

Three knocks? If you haven't updated your next of kin, now might be the time.

Keep a cool head and trust your official ExorSquad Ltd. equipment to handle the job.

Note: ExorSquad Ltd. accepts no liability for injury, death, dismemberment, possession, spontaneous combustion, or unauthorized eternal damnation.

*—ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines
(Revised Edition)*

CALLUM

Christ on a bike. How has my sorry excuse for a life come to this?

Mimi Dalton, the owner of Salon de Spin, studies me skeptically from where she sits behind her office desk. “Gerald over at ExorSquad told that you’re a”—she looks at the notes in front of her—“a Spirit Extraction Specialist but you used to be”—she turns the page—“a detective inspector for the Met?”

I try not to wince at the new title, or the lingering pain of the old one, and clear my throat.

“Aye, that’s right.”

I’d been a detective inspector much longer than I’ve been in my current role. At one time, my entire life had been my career. I lived and breathed working for the Met. Then one close call brought me face-to-face with the supernatural in a manner I couldn’t deny, no matter how hard I tried.

It ultimately set me on the path to where I am now, hunting ghosts and trying to reclaim control over my life after it all went pear-shaped. I’m hoping this case will give me some much-needed answers in addition to experience.

But at the moment, it’s like I’m fumbling about in the dark without a torch, and I’m just as clueless about what I’m dealing with now as when I almost died on my last case as a DI five years ago.

Relief washes over Mimi’s face. “A friend put me in contact with ExorSquad when I was nearly at my wit’s end. Gerald assured me you’d be able to handle my little problem. He’s made me feel so much better about this whole mess.”

I don’t bloody doubt it. Gerald’s got the air of a skeevy used car salesman about him, but he knows how to tell anxious clients exactly what they want to hear.

Way to throw me under the bus, Gerald. If this all goes tits up, I’ll be the one to blame, no doubt.

Bastard.

Mimi leans forward, clasping her hands together on her desk. She’s in her mid-thirties and dressed head to toe in a pink athleisure sweatsuit with some logo I don’t know from Adam, but I can tell the outfit’s expensive. Her blond hair’s pulled up into a sleek ponytail, and her white trainers look like they’ve never set foot on a London street.

“I’ll be honest, Mr. Fraser, I desperately need your help. My studio’s barely been open a month and I’m losing clients left and right due to the... strange phenomena that’ve been happening.”

She shifts uncomfortably in her office chair, and I don’t blame her. Five years ago, if you’d asked me if ghosts were real, I would’ve told you that’s a load of pish.

I keep my expression blank and don’t bother to tell her that the so-called Spirit Extraction Specialist training I very recently received with ExorSquad is laughable at best. I also refrain from sharing that this is my first bona fide case with the company. My new boss, Gerald Pickett, dumped this one on me and didn’t seem to be concerned about my lack of experience—even when I flatly rejected his attempt to assign me an ExorSquad partner.

When I stumbled across one of ExorSquad’s adverts a few weeks ago, I knew I had to investigate. After all, I’d found few answers for the mysteries plaguing my life now that I can see dead people. Fucking hell, I’ve basically turned into that kid in *The Sixth Sense* except that I can’t communicate with any of them. I see them clear as day, but it’s radio silence. I’m not even sure if ghosts can talk, to be honest.

All this is to say, I was fucking desperate when I signed up with ExorSquad. Sadly, the answers I was hoping for didn’t come. Instead, I was given a brief orientation, a questionable handbook, some weird gadgets that I’m not convinced do much of anything, and sent on my merry way.

Some days I can’t fathom the bizarre turn my life’s taken.

Okay, to be fair, I did receive a lot of information about supposed “entity levels” and associated abilities, but sometimes what the instructor told us ended up contradicting itself or being open-ended. For instance, I could never get a straight answer as to why I can see ghosts now but others can’t—even when a ghost is in the same room with us both. Entities, it would seem, aren’t entirely consistent in their behaviors or how they manifest. I’ll admit, I kind of tuned out after that and just went through the motions, figuring I’d learn more out in the field than in their sorry excuse for a classroom.

I’ve always been more of a hands-on learner anyway.

My days as a DI are over, so working as a Spirit Extraction Specialist for ExorSquad, which amounts to being a private investigator into possible paranormal phenomena, is the new direction I’m taking for now.

I try not to grimace as I shift in my hard wooden chair to ease the discomfort in my fucked-up back and pull out my notepad. Some habits die hard.

“Why don’t you fill me in on the situation? Start from the beginning.”

Mimi leans closer, her voice getting quieter, as if she doesn’t want anyone else to hear. “At first, it was just small things—the lights flickering every now and then, temperature fluctuations in the main spin studio. Stuff like that, easy to write off. I brought in an electrician and had the thermostat checked, but everything was fine. We decided to ignore the little oddities.” She bites her bottom lip and looks away. “But then things... escalated.”

I pause in my scribbling and eye her sharply. “How so?”

Her right eye twitches and her mouth sets in a grim line. “First, one of the studio cycles malfunctioned and injured Tate, my best instructor and the one in charge of evening classes. Our cycles are brand-new machines, it shouldn’t have happened. Later, I had someone come out to examine Tate’s bike and they found nothing wrong with it. But...”

It’s my turn to lean closer. “What?”

She swallows. “According to Tate, and a few students I spoke with afterward who attended the class, it was like the bike was possessed or something. The pedals started going faster than humanly possible. Then poor Tate was basically ejected from the bike by some unseen force, one that flung him several feet in the air!” She shakes her head in dismay. “I didn’t want to believe it at first, but the accounts were all the same. And if it were a joke, those students wouldn’t have canceled their memberships in obvious fear. That’s when I realized there was something *unnatural* at work here.”

“What about CCTV footage?” I ask.

“That’s the thing.” She gulps and clutches her hands tightly. “They went on the fritz that night—but *only* during that class session and *only* in that room. They came right back online after everyone fled.”

A familiar tightening sensation in my gut, the one I always used to get when I knew I was on the trail of a criminal, tells me this job might be the real deal—unexplained paranormal phenomena.

“What happened next?”

Mimi sighs. “Thankfully, Tate’s injuries weren’t too serious—just some bruising and a sprained ankle—but he was spooked.” She arches an

eyebrow. “No pun intended. He handed in his resignation and like I said, *all* the students in that class canceled their memberships.”

I nod slowly. “Not surprising. That would be unsettling to almost everyone.”

Mimi’s bottom lip trembles. “For a little while after that, things seemed to go back to normal, but the studio was getting some bad word of mouth from former members who’d left us in a hurry. I was struggling financially, but we hadn’t had anything like what happened to Tate.” Her face crumples. “Then odd things started happening again.”

I offer a grunt of commiseration.

“At first, it was small. People attending the evening classes started hearing strange knocking noises in the hallways, and one woman ran screaming out of the toilets, claiming she saw someone behind her in the mirror but no one was there when she turned around.” She rubs at her temples. “And for some bizarre reason, we can’t play our music tracks during evening classes either. Somehow, they always turn into”—she scrunches up her face—“old disco hits.”

I blink at her. “That’s unusual.”

But it also seems important, so I underline that in my notes.

“Look, I’m not one to judge people’s musical preferences, but my clients want contemporary songs with a beat that gets their blood pumping so they can enter the zone while they spin.”

“You’ve mentioned only the evening classes. Has any of this happened during the daytime?”

Mimi shakes her head. “No, thank goodness. Our morning classes haven’t had any issues. They’re the only thing keeping the business barely afloat right now.”

“And you’re certain it isn’t one of your employees pulling pranks?”

She frowns. “I checked, but there’s nothing that suggests any of my staff are behind this. If anything, I’m having a hell of a time keeping most of them. Even they’re starting to get freaked out by the whole situation. Only Brad is bull-headed enough to keep teaching an evening spin class.”

She slumps in her chair and suddenly looks a few years older than I initially pegged her. “We’re down to that one evening class now, after starting out with four, but I’m having to cancel it more often than not because we can’t get anyone to sign up anymore. It’s a prime time for us. People get off work and want to get a good workout in. Income from the

day classes won't keep the studio going for very long. I've got to be able to resume offering evening classes that clients will feel safe in and that won't scare them off."

"Is there a class happening tonight?"

Mimi shakes her head sadly. "No one signed up and I can't afford to pay an instructor when there aren't any students."

"My recommendation for now would be to put the evening classes on temporary hiatus. To be on the safe side."

Mimi runs a hand down her face. "I figured as much."

I lean back in my seat and contemplate what she's told me. "Since activity only seems to happen at night, I'll come back this evening when no one's around to do some recon on my own."

Mimi frowns. "You don't want me to join you?"

I shake my head. "I can't ensure your safety if you do." I flash her a smile filled with DI-level confidence. "Don't worry, I can handle myself."

"Fair enough. That's honestly a bit of a relief." She shivers and rubs her arms. "Being here at night is too creepy these days." She tilts her head and bites her bottom lip. "How long do you think this will take? The investigation, I mean."

I close my notebook and return it and my pen to my jacket pocket.

"That's hard to say right now. I should have a better idea what we're dealing with after tonight."

I'm bullshitting on that one, but she doesn't need to know that.

She wrings her hands. "I understand. But if you can get this wrapped up within the next two weeks, I'll be more than willing to pay a bonus. Once I get on my feet financially again, I mean."

"I'll keep that in mind. Right now, I'd like to take a look around and interview some of your employees."

"Of course," Mimi agrees, and takes me on a quick tour.

As I wander through Salon de Spin, nothing seems out of the ordinary. In fact, the building appears to be pretty contemporary, making me wonder just how old it is. The electrical all looks up to code, and the handful of employees I talk to are just as on edge as Mimi. Most inform me that they refuse to do any of the night classes after what happened to Tate.

This place is posh and geared toward a certain type of clientele, but it doesn't carry any vibes that tug at my instincts. After years at the Met, I've developed a highly reliable radar for danger, and nothing's pinging me here.

But I've also learned that, when it comes to the supernatural, time of day can make a huge difference. Coming back tonight will be critical.

I meet up with Mimi again to take a look at some of the studio's security footage for the entrances. Like a lot of businesses these days, Salon de Spin has CCTV monitoring the front and back doors, but these don't show anything out of the ordinary on the dates of the incidents she mentioned.

We say our goodbyes around noon, and I head out into a brisk October day, the sky gray and dreary. I make my way back to my flat, and when I unlock the door, my cat, Poirot, greets me with immediate leg rubs, clearly hoping for some food.

"The vet says you need to lose weight, chum."

Poirot gives me a dirty look and ambles off, tail flicking with irritation.

Sitting at my kitchen bar, I make a quick call.

"Thank you for calling ExorSquad, where all your hauntings go to die."

I cringe. "Hiya, Ted. Is Gerald around? Need to update him on my visit to Salon de Spin."

My boss's assistant puts me on hold and I listen to the tinny Muzak for a couple of minutes.

"What've you got for me, Callum?" Gerald suddenly says into the line.

From the puffing noise he makes while talking, I'm guessing he's smoking again, despite indoor regulations.

I don't waste time and give him a quick recap.

Gerald grunts when I finish. "You've got your equipment ready for tonight?"

Damn him and the bloody equipment. Most of it seems about as useful as a dousing rod in the Sahara Desert.

"Sure," I hedge.

"If you encounter any technical issues, you're on your own. We don't have any tech support at the moment."

I frown. "What happened to Hollis?"

That guy was like the Q of supernatural gadgets. Total nerd but very reliable.

"Look at the time. Gotta run. Important meeting," Gerald says, sounding dodgy as hell, and then hangs up.

The slimy impression I got upon first meeting him continues to grow. I don't trust him one bloody bit. When this case is over, I may end up handing in my notice and going freelance if I want to keep doing this. I'd

rather be my own boss than continue working for someone like Gerald for very long.

Tossing my phone aside, I make myself a quick lunch of beans on toast, followed by a strong cup of tea, which I sip as I open my laptop and type up my notes from my appointment. Then I do a quick internet search on the address of the studio, but I don't find any indicators that something bad has happened on the site in the past.

Leaning back in my chair, I finish the dregs of my tea and devise my plan for tonight. It's time for me to see if there really are ghosts in this building or if I'm being led on a wild goose chase.

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CHAPTER TWO



Hi, y'all, and welcome back to Beau's Boos and Beyond—aka the Southern Gentleman's Hour of Spirit Talk. I'm your host, Beau Montgomery, and this here podcast is dedicated to the exploration of the supernatural. For all y'all who consider this a bunch of hooey, you can mosey on to the next podcast on your playlist.

Folks who've never had a brush with the beyond can't quite wrap their heads around the idea of ghosts. Others don't want to think about it because it requires them to contemplate a universal human fear—death.

It's one thing we all have in common. Someday, life's gonna end for each of us. But what happens next is shrouded in mystery. The idea of spirits, phantoms, and ghosts has been around for a very long time in many cultures. Yet the supernatural remains intangible to a lot of folks, something that cannot be scientifically quantified.

However, some are able to see what others cannot. Some, like yours truly, were born with what my mama calls "The Gift." Others have had near-death experiences and have gotten close to the Veil. I don't rightly know why this happens in such traumatic situations, but I have theories and I'll share them with y'all another time.

On this show, I aim to give everyone a glimpse into the supernatural realm. Thanks for coming along for the ride. Now, let's get into our first episode...

BEAU

“Good morning, luv. Did you sleep well?”

As I sit down for breakfast, I beam at Miz Edna, the charming elderly woman who runs the B&B where I'm staying.

“Slept like the dead,” I tell her with a wink, keeping an eye on the gentleman ghost I see standing in the corner with his arms crossed. He remains silent but glares at me.

Miz Edna bustles around the small dining room then heads back into the kitchen. A short time later, she returns and sets down a steaming plate of breakfast in front of me, then pours me a cup of coffee.

“I know you Yanks prefer coffee to tea in the morning,” she says with a chuckle.

I grin. “Mighty obliged, ma'am. Where I come from, we do have tea, but it's the iced, sweet variety and more of a hot afternoon kind of beverage.”

I blink down at the mountain of food on my plate. There are two poached eggs, two sausages, sautéed mushrooms, a cooked tomato, and what looks to be baked beans, only they don't quite look like the ones from back home.

I glance up at Miz Edna. “So, is this the famous full English breakfast I've heard so much about?”

She nods. “That it is. Enjoy.”

I lay my napkin in my lap and tuck in.

The food's delicious, although it's a bit different from what I'm used to in the morning. Apart from the eggs and sausages, that is. Then again, I've never been a picky eater. Lord knows, my Aunt Mabel is the queen of mystery casseroles at family reunions. You never know what kind of meat you might get in one of her offerings, but I'm always the first in line to take a bite.

The beans, I think, are what really surprises me. They're not as sweet as the baked beans I'm used to back home and are, quite frankly, a bit bland.

Thankfully, like a good Southern boy, I came to London prepared.

I open my messenger bag and pull out my travel-sized bottle of Granny's secret recipe hot sauce. I pour it liberally over the beans and enjoy

them, now suitably doctored up, with the last of my toast.

When I finish, I lean back and stroke my stomach in satisfaction.

“Thank you very kindly for such a wonderful meal,” I tell Miz Edna when she comes back to clear the table.

“And what are your plans for today?”

I pull out Daddy’s old pocket watch, my most treasured keepsake from him. Nine o’clock on the dot. I grin. “Well, I’m fixing to start with one of those double-decker bus tours of the city. Get the lay of the land, so to speak. I’m a tourist, after all, and since it’s my first time here, I do intend to visit all the attractions I can.”

And, of course, I have my own separate itinerary of haunted locations I plan to visit while I’m here. But I don’t share that with Miz Edna or the ghost in the corner who’s still watching me.

Part of the reason I’m here is to do research for my podcast, but it’s also to satisfy my own curiosity about what ghosts in England are like, some of whom are probably a hell of a lot more famous than the ones back home.

There are loads of online accounts of locals and visitors encountering ghosts from hundreds of years ago, but as with most things on the internet, you can’t trust everything you read. Instead, I am coming to the source and trusting my own senses. After all, they’re a lot more attuned to the supernatural than those of the average person.

Miz Edna gives me a couple of suggestions for places where I might want to find dinner and then I head out into a chilly October morning. It’s damp and gray outside, just like I expected. I’ve read plenty a novel set in England, and I have a bit of a fascination with some of the BBC’s cozy murder mystery series.

To be honest, the cooler weather is a nice reprieve from what back home has been like. Right now, we’re experiencing a heatwave that’s made summer feel never-ending. Here, however, fall is well underway.

I’m my mama’s son, so I’m prepared. With a smile, I zip up my waterproof jacket and inhale the crisp air tinged with the unmistakable odor of dead leaves and a faintly smoky scent. What I’m really hoping for while I’m here is some of that famous London fog. A real “pea souper,” as they call it. Wouldn’t that be something?

It isn’t long until I find myself on a much busier thoroughfare than the quiet side street where the B&B is. I check my phone for the nearest Tube station that’ll take me to Piccadilly Circus.

There are some really interesting names for places here. When I was riding a train the other day, I saw someplace on the map called Cockfosters. I have to wonder what that place is all about!

When I enter the Tube station, I check the wall map to figure out which direction I need to be going. It's much easier to read than pulling it up on my phone. Hmm. It might be neat to get a copy of the Tube map and have it framed back home.

Once I figure out where I need to be going, I mosey along. Thank goodness I watched a couple of YouTube videos about navigating the infamous London Underground before I came over here. I like to think of myself as a fairly intelligent and resourceful man, but even I find the London Underground a little intimidating.

The trickiest thing for me is remembering that the flow of foot traffic on the stairs goes opposite to that back home. I suppose it must be because they also drive on the other side of the road. I found out the hard way that those stairs can be deadly if you're not going in the correct direction. The bruise on my hip's been reminding me daily.

Once I get to my platform, I stand a good distance behind the yellow line and wait for my train. The platform isn't terribly busy at this time of morning. I made sure I took my time getting out the door so I didn't have to compete with the rush-hour crush.

"Oi! You got a light, mate?" a voice says.

With a sigh, I turn and study the ghost beside me, who looks to be a young man in ripped jeans and wearing a leather jacket over a T-shirt. His hair is done up in a spiky punk-rock look.

"Sorry," I say softly, keeping my voice low. "I don't smoke."

"Bollocks," he mutters, and wanders off.

I heave a quiet sigh of relief.

The dead are never consistent in how they behave toward someone like myself. I may have what Mama calls "The Gift," but being able to see and hear the dead is both a blessing and a curse, as she likes to say.

When I was a child, I struggled to distinguish between the living and the dead, often talking to what seemed like nobody to my peers. I learned to be more circumspect as I got older, but there are times even now when I can't avoid communicating with a spirit in the presence of other living people.

Some spirits are in a kind of strange, repetitive loop of behaviors, much like this ghost. I study him as he continues to approach others waiting for

the train and asking for a light. None of them, however, can hear him. He just moves on to someone else, his cycle going forever.

I shake my head sadly.

Many spirits stuck here are confused about where they are and what happened to them, and a lot don't recall exactly how they died. There are often gaps or missing pieces. If I spend a lot of time talking with them, sometimes they kind of feed off my energy and manage to recall more details, but this often stops short of the grand finale. Perhaps we can't handle revisiting the moment of our own demise. Humans do tend to be a bit fragile when it comes to the subject of mortality. I'm more sanguine on the issue than the average guy, especially since I know that we continue to exist in some fashion even after our physical bodies die. But spirits stuck in this realm, for whatever reason, aren't ready or willing to move on to what comes next.

Sometimes, when a spirit has enough sense to understand they need my assistance, I try to help them along. But there are far too many spirits lingering in this world for me to handle all by my lonesome. I naively thought I could when I was young, but reality soon disabused me of that particular notion. Now I just try to live my life and do all I can for those I come across.

My train soon arrives, and when the doors whoosh open, I hurry inside and manage to find a seat. Thankfully, my train carriage doesn't have any lingering spirits on it as far as I can tell, so I settle back to enjoy the short ride.

When I emerge from the Piccadilly Circus Station, I can't help but look around, wide-eyed. It takes some real effort to shut my mouth as I stare.

London is a place unlike any I've ever been in my life. Granted, I haven't visited too many places outside of Alabama, but the sheer size of the city, the age of some of the buildings, and the overwhelming number of people are a lot to take in.

The roundabout at Piccadilly Circus looks a bit like a kamikaze racetrack, with cars honking and narrowly missing one another as they merge in and out of the circular loop with daredevil-level intensity. It makes me whistle and then chuckle, reminding me of *National Lampoon's European Vacation* and that infamous scene when the Griswolds get stuck driving in endless circles.

For the safety of myself and all the innocent people in England, I have no plans to drive a vehicle over here. That would just be asking for disaster. I know my limits, and that is definitely one of them.

Out of old habit and despite the overcast sky, I slip on my sunglasses. Once spirits notice you noticing them, it can be awfully darn difficult to get them to leave you alone. My sunglasses provide a bit of a protective shield from that.

It doesn't take me very long to find a sign for the double-decker bus tour I want to do, and within minutes, I'm sitting up top and watching the city go by.

As we pass the Tower of London, Big Ben, and Parliament, as well as Buckingham Palace and a whole bunch of other places, I pull out the snazzy vintage Polaroid camera Mama bought me just for this trip—she knows what I like—and snap photos like a man possessed, making mental notes of the places I want to actually visit. I also end up with quite a few good prints to include in the scrapbook I'm planning to make when I go home.

By the time my loop around the city ends, it's nearing lunchtime, so I disembark to see where my feet and the wind take me.

There's certainly no shortage of places to eat in this city, but I take my time as I navigate the streets and check out all the restaurant fronts. People here sure do move a lot faster than we tend to down in Alabama though. They're all rushing somewhere as I duck out of the way and continue taking my time to read menus in windows. I don't bother taking photos out here, worried someone might bump into me and cause me to drop my precious camera. That's not a risk I'm willing to take right now. At least I have a proper carrying case for it with a cross-body strap, so I can keep it close at all times.

As I amble along, my phone rings. I smile when I pull it out and see who it is.

I press my phone to one ear and cup my hand over the other so I can hear around the street noise. "Hello, Mama."

"Beauregard Jeremiah Montgomery, you were supposed to check in with me two hours ago."

I wince as I continue to walk. "Sorry, Mama. After I called to let you know I landed, it was a bit of an ordeal figuring out the train into the city, and then how to get to my B&B. By the time I got there, I just took a

shower and crashed out for the next twelve hours. Don't you fret, I'm out exploring and feeling back to my usual self."

"I know I'm probably being overly anxious. I just worry about you, sweetie," she says. "You're special, and that means you end up finding yourself in a whole lot of trouble even when you don't mean to. And in a city as old as London? That can be a whole helluva lot more than your usual lot."

I wince again. I can't deny it.

"I'm being careful," I say, "and I am a grown man now, after all. I can look after myself."

"You'll always be my baby boy," she replies defiantly.

I chuckle.

"Are you having a good time?" Her voice is softer now.

"You better believe it. I've never seen so many old buildings with all kinds of architectural styles right next to each other like this. And London's so much bigger than I imagined in my head. It's amazing."

"Well, I don't see what it has to offer that Mobile doesn't have," Mama grumbles a little indignantly.

This is the first time I've left Mama and traveled out of Alabama by myself. But I'm twenty-nine, going on thirty real soon, and I need to spread my wings and fly, as they say. It's been a bit of an adjustment for us both, and Mama hasn't quite gotten used to not seeing and talking to me every day.

Mama and I have always been close. We lost Daddy when I was just a boy, and Mama raised me all on her own. It wasn't easy, especially when Mama got sick. Doctors ignored her symptoms for a long time until things got much worse. That's when she got a lupus diagnosis and we could finally start treating the condition properly. There were times when she'd be bedridden or unable to leave the house for days on end, and I did all I could to contribute to the household. Cooking, cleaning, and giving her gentle massages when she wasn't in acute flare-up. It took a long time for her to go into remission, and the toll it all took on her body made it hard for her to work, let alone take care of herself like she needed to. Fortunately, Daddy had taken out a life insurance policy when they got married, never expecting we'd need to use it so soon, but it kept us from falling into abject poverty. In addition, I'd take odd jobs here and there to bring extra cash,

mowing yards, fetching groceries for some elderly folks, and delivering newspapers.

When I turned eighteen, things got loads better. It turned out that Daddy's parents, whom I'd never really met, had left most of their money in a trust for me to start being parceled out to me once I graduated from high school. I'll get complete access to the full trust when I turn thirty soon, but the money I've received up till now has been plenty.

I'm not living high on the hog, but I've got enough for me and Mama to be comfortable for the rest of our lives. That's probably a good thing because I've had a devil of a time holding down any kind of conventional job for long. The whole seeing ghosts thing ends up causing all sorts of problems. My podcast's growing in popularity, but it doesn't bring in any real money.

"I think you'd like it over here," I tell Mama. "In fact, why don't we come over together next time? My treat."

"Hmm, you might be able to talk me into that," she says, "but for now, I'm still thinking about that cruise you've been dangling in front of me and Doreen."

Doreen has been Mama's best friend since her senior year of high school. She's a drag queen who hosts Sunday Drag Bingo in town—Mama helps her give out cards and calls the numbers. Doreen's the one person who came by on a regular basis to help us out during hard times. When Mama was too sick to get out of bed, Doreen would cook and stockpile food that we could reheat easily in the fridge for us. She also helped me with homework and made sure I was doing okay. This was all while she was working a full-time job as a lab tech at the hospital too. Now that she's retired, she's Doreen more often than she's Bill. As she told me not too long ago, "Bill is part of me and serves his purpose, but the older I get the more fabulous I want to feel, and Doreen is the epitome of fabulous."

I'd never disagree with that.

Needless to say, she's like a second mom to me, and of course I offered to send them both on a cruise. They deserve it.

"The both of you should swallow your foolish pride and accept my offer. It'll do you both a world of good and it would make me so happy to gift that experience to y'all."

"That's my baby. Generous to a fault."

“Oh, hush. If you can’t be generous with the people you love, then what’s the point?”

Mama chuckles. “I’ll think about it. Thank you, honey.”

We chat for a couple more minutes before saying our goodbyes.

It’s early yet and I still have plenty of time for sightseeing, so I let my intuition guide me.

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CHAPTER THREE



RULE # 5: NEVER SPLIT UP!

Remember, safety in numbers. Divide and conquer is a bunch of bullshit when it comes to spectral entities. They would love nothing more than to get you and your partner alone. That leaves you both open and vulnerable—and it could end up with one of you finding yourself six feet under. If you want to stay in the land of the living in corporeal form, stick close to your partner at all times.

*—ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines
(Revised Edition)*

CALLUM

Just as I'm getting ready to leave for my nighttime investigation of the Salon de Spin, my mobile rings. I glance at the screen and hesitate.

With a reluctant sigh, I answer the call from my old partner at the Met.

"Liz, good to hear from you. It's been ages."

"And whose fault is that?" she replies tartly.

I grimace. I've got no comeback to that.

"Sorry. Life's been a bit... *odd* lately."

“What, you mean more than you being able to see ghosts?”

I run a hand over my face and groan. I never should have told her, but she was my partner, and you don’t keep that kind of stuff from your partner.

“That’s a big part of it, aye. In fact, I’m on a potential haunting case right now.”

“Riiiiight,” she says.

“I know you don’t believe in this sort of thing.”

“It’s hard for me to believe in something I can’t see.”

“No shit. Same for me. That is, until I died for two minutes.”

It’s Liz’s turn to inhale sharply, and I mentally curse myself for being a fool.

This is a hard topic for both of us, and I know Liz feels unwarranted guilt because she wasn’t there to back me up when shit went down and I had my accident on the job.

“Sorry. If you say you can see ghosts, then you can. You’re not a liar, Callum Fraser.” She clears her throat awkwardly. “How’s your health these days?”

“About as good as it’s likely to get,” I admit. “The nerve damage from the fall sometimes gives me trouble, numbness down my leg or weakness in one side, which is fucking terrible. Still, some days are better or worse than others. But I’ve done all the PT in the world. There’s not much more I can do, so now I just live with it. The time between flare-ups seems to be getting longer, so I’ll take that as a win.”

What I don’t tell her is that when it gets really bad, I have to use a bloody cane. Thankfully, that’s not too often. It makes me feel like I’ve turned into my granddad. The man’s ninety-five and I’m barely forty-three.

My injury was serious enough, though, that I had to take an early retirement with an ill-health pension because my body just couldn’t do the job anymore. Back then, I was bedridden for a long time, and it took two years of intense physical therapy to get to where I am now. Most days I’m fine, and I’ve stayed fit with regular cardio and strength training, but when the nerve damage acts up, I can be out of commission for long periods of time, and there’s so far no rhyme or reason as to when that might happen.

Liz and I had a mutual drunken pity party together after my retirement was decided, and now she’s gone on to bigger and better things.

“How’s life treating you, Detective Chief Inspector Wu? You’re moving on up the chain now.”

She snorts. "It's a nice pay bump, but it also means I've got a whole load more administrative bullshit to deal with now."

I chuckle. "Your husband probably likes that, you being in the office more than out on the streets. Probably gives him peace of mind."

She sighs heavily through the connection. "That it does. And now that the girls are in school full-time, it makes even more sense. Do you have any idea how expensive it is to raise children these days? And in London, no less?"

"Ouch. And that's yet another reason I plan to remain unencumbered by offspring in this lifetime."

"Lucky you," she gripes. "The cheeky buggers are expensive as fuck. The pay increase has given us a little bit of breathing room though, so I'll remain calm and carry on."

"You always do, love," I tell her.

Liz Wu is as steady as they come. I was a lucky bastard to have her as a partner for nearly fifteen years.

"Doug and I would love to see you," she says, shifting gears. "Why don't you come over to ours for dinner one night? It's been far too long since you've been over."

I know I'm a right git since the accident when it comes to communicating. When I was finally let out of hospital, I holed myself up from the world for quite a while, bemoaning the end of my career at thirty-eight.

Five years later, I've come to terms with the situation, but that doesn't mean it doesn't still hurt to see Liz and all my old pals continuing in the career I loved but can't do anymore.

"Sure. I'll let you know when some free time opens up in my schedule."

It's a bit of a brush-off and we both know it, but she doesn't call me on it. Instead, she says, "Why don't you tell me more about this case you're working on?"

Now that has me more enthused, so I give her a quick rundown of the situation.

"Blimey, that sounds pretty out there. Are you sure it isn't a disgruntled employee taking the piss?"

"No idea. I interviewed most of the staff earlier today, and I don't get the impression that any of them are involved. On the contrary, they're all on

edge and about ready to bolt. For now, my plan is to go in tonight and snoop around on my own.”

“Be careful, Cal. You said someone’s already been hurt. Don’t take any unnecessary risks.”

It’s my turn to snort. “You’ve developed quite the Mum Voice since having the twins.”

“Comes with the territory. And hey, if it keeps your arse out of danger, I’m not going to complain.”

“You’ll be happy to know I’ve been a lot more cautious since the accident.”

I sort of have to be if I don’t want to make my condition worse.

There’s a beat of silence, and a whole fuck of a lot that’s left unsaid.

Finally, she sighs. “Let me know if I can help in any way. You may not have access to resources at the Met anymore, but there are things I can look up for you if you ever need it. I’ve still got your back.”

“Ta, Liz. That means more to me than I can express.”

She clears her throat. “Once my partner, always my partner, Callum Fraser. Take care and do get back to me about your schedule. Dinner’s going to happen, whether you like it or not. Is that Mum Voice enough for you?”

I chuckle. “All right, I hear you loud and clear. Give the girls and Doug my love.”

We end the call, and I rub at the twinge of pain in my chest.

Liz Wu is an outstanding officer, a true friend, and the best partner a man could have. She deserved better than a grumpy bastard like me for a partner, but we worked well as a team for many years. We understood each other inside and out and were a unified front in all things.

When the accident happened, she was out on maternity leave. And yes, things may not have gone down the way they did if she’d been with me. But that line of thinking won’t get me anything other than bitter regret.

I shrug on my jacket, finish loading up my bag of gadgets, and give Poirot a couple of scratches behind his ears before heading out into the night.

When I arrive at Salon de Spin, I use the spare key Mimi lent me to let myself in. At this time of year, it’s dark out and has been for a while even though it’s only six o’clock. Their evening block of classes typically started at 6:30 p.m. until things went haywire, so I wanted to be here a little early. I

don't know yet if there's any significance to the time the phenomena tend to occur in the evening or not.

Carrying my large bag of supplies inside, I make my way to the main studio where evening classes are held. Entering the room, I find it dark and silent. The rows of stationary cycles are reflected by the mirrored walls.

I set down my bag with a grunt. ExorSquad gave me a bunch of gadgets that I don't fully know how to use, but I set them out on the floor. I can't even remember the bloody technical names for any of them. One's supposed to trap ghosts, another is supposed to repel them. Not sure I really believe that though. The one useful item is an EMF device, something I had heard of before I joined the company and that actually seems to have a practical function. I hold on to it so I can keep an eye on the gauge for any detected fluctuations.

I dim the room's lights low enough so I can see but dark enough to potentially make the spirits more inclined to come out and play. Sitting on the floor, I close my eyes and wait.

After about thirty minutes with no real activity, I start getting antsy. Patience has never been one of my strong suits.

Taking my mobile and the EMF reader, I get up and start a sweep of the building. Moving systematically from room to room, I monitor the device but don't notice any inconsistencies. I've managed to cover most of the building and am on my way back to the studio when I hear a faint knocking sound coming from one of the locker rooms.

My pulse ratchets up, and my grip on the EMF reader tightens. Quietly, I move toward the room's door. The EMF's gauge starts fluttering, and I have to swallow hard as I push open the door.

The locker room is dark, so I turn on my mobile's flashlight.

I nearly jump when I hear the noise again—three distinct knocks.

A chill races up my spine, and all the hairs on my body rise as my EMF gauge starts going haywire.

I whirl around and—

"Fuck!"

I drop my mobile and gape at the ghostly apparition glowing in front of me.

My mind flashes back on the first time I saw a ghost, right after I almost died.

I shove the memory away.

Cautiously, with one eye on the ghost, I reach down and pick up my mobile, gripping it tight. My breath comes out in rapid gasps and I realize I'm nearly hyperventilating, so I force myself to focus on regulating my breathing as I study the *entity* as ExorSquad would call it.

He's a young man in his mid- to late twenties, sporting a hairstyle and mustache that hearkens back to images I've seen from the 1970s. His open V-neck shirt and bell-bottoms also suggest that time period.

I watch in mute horror as his mouth opens and he moves his lips.

Fuck if I know what he's saying. I can't hear a bloody thing.

"Look, mate," I say. "I can't hear you at all. I don't know what you want, and I don't know why you're here. But you'd be doing me a favor if you'd just bugger off. You're bad for my client's business."

The ghost stares through me as if I'm not here and I begin to question my life choices.

Why am I trying to talk to a ghost? Why the hell did I sign up for this job?

And fuck. I should have brought that spirit zapper thingamajig with me.

Sure, I might be able to see ghosts now, but that's it. I don't have any other special kind of mojo that I'm aware of, and if I can't communicate with them, I don't know how the hell I can get them to fuck off.

And, of course, I also left my supposed spirit trap device back in the studio, so that's a no-go.

I'm stood there without a fucking clue what to do, like some eejit with his thumb up his arse, when all of a sudden the locker room door bursts open and the light turns on.

My heart nearly leaps out of my chest.

"Who's there?" I yell, automatically reaching for the baton I no longer carry. "Fuck!" I mutter under my breath.

I'm expecting another fucking ghost. What I get instead is a man, younger than me, rounding the corner of the bank of lockers, and I have to blink for a moment as I take him all in. My very first thought is that he's a rather odd duck.

He's tall and lean, dressed in a pair of gray trousers with rainbow suspenders and a peach-colored dress shirt that's fastened at the neck with a matching rainbow bow tie. A small earring dangles from his right ear, and his sandy blond hair is messy and wild, like he's become statically charged or something.

His face and those bright green eyes are downright beautiful though. Like one of those old Greek Adonis paintings.

“Who the fuck are you, and how the hell did you get in here?” I demand.

“My apologies, sir,” he says in a strange American accent. “I’m Beau Montgomery, and to put it simply, I was drawn to this building. The spiritual activity in here is quite strong, even from outside.” He gestures at the ghost still standing beside me. “And that fella right there is one of those spirits makin’ all that commotion.”

I inhale sharply and damn near drop my phone again. “You can see it?”

He beams back. “Of course I can, darlin’. Not only can I see him, I can also hear him—and what he’s saying is mighty strange.”

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CHAPTER FOUR



Thanks for tuning in to another episode of Beau's Boos and Beyond, y'all. I'm your host, Beau Montgomery, and today we're going to talk about unfinished business.

It's the number one reason most spirits are stuck here in this realm rather than moving on to the next. Lots of folks kick the bucket before they're ready to, and that means they may have lingering attachments or regrets that keep them in limbo. Now, that's not to say they're trapped here forever. Some are able to eventually move on by themselves. Others need a helping hand, which is something I try to offer to those who are willing. But sadly, some spirits will probably stay here forever.

I've seen all kinds in this category. Some clearly suffered a trauma so terrible they're still in a state of shock even after death. Others are so downright scared that they refuse to budge. And some spirits actually seem content to remain here and observe the living. Every spirit's a little bit different, just like we all are when we're alive.

However, there's another category of spirit, and that's the malevolent type. We'll get to that in another episode.

—Beau's Boos and Beyond, Episode 4

BEAU

The sexiest man I've seen since landing in Heathrow and I stare at one another, locked in a weird kind of stalemate.

"What's your name, darlin'?" I ask with a sultry little purr, laying on my Southern charm. Mama always tells me it's one of my superpowers.

"How the bloody hell did you get in here?" he demands, ignoring my extended olive branch.

"Well, if you hadn't left the door unlocked—"

He scowls. "I locked that damn door, I know I did."

I chuckle. "Spirits can do the darndest things sometimes."

His brow furrows, and he narrows his eyes. "I'm Callum Fraser. I've been hired to investigate the bizarre goings-on in this building." He crosses his arms and stares me down. "Did Mimi send you? Or worse yet, that sleazeball, Gerald?"

My charms, such as they are, don't appear to be working on him.

Well, I always have loved a challenge.

I redouble my efforts and flash him a mega-watt smile. "I'm afraid I don't know a Miz Mimi or a Mr. Gerald. Like I said, I was drawn here by the spiritual energy coming off this place. It's quite strong but unstable."

"Are you fuckin' joking?"

His voice is deliciously growly, and his Scottish accent is sexy as hell but not as thick as I've heard in some films and television shows. My guess is he's lived in London for some time, and his accent may have softened as a result.

Something I'll have to explore as I get to know him better. Because I certainly plan to.

He looks me up and down skeptically, then points a thumb at the apparition beside him. "You seriously can hear what this thing's saying?"

"Of course I can, sugar, but I honestly don't know what it means. And please don't call him a *thing*, that used to be a person. Spirit, ghost, apparition—any of those options would be more appropriate and polite until we learn this poor soul's name. But at the moment, our friend here seems disoriented and confused. Not uncommon with some spirits though."

I listen to another cycle of the ghost's refrain and then turn my attention back to Callum.

"He keeps saying *It won't open. Help. It won't open.*"

Callum pulls out a small notebook from a pocket and quickly jots down what I've told him, frowning as he does so.

And how does he make even that look hot?

"Any ideas what it might mean?"

I shrug my shoulders. "I honestly can't say for sure, but it probably relates to whatever happened to him shortly before he died." I look around. "Most spirits tend to be stuck in the place where their life ended. But this building looks like it was built in the last twenty-five years, whereas our friend here looks like he's from sometime last century. I can't imagine this was the place where this poor soul met his unfortunate demise."

Cal gives a noncommittal grunt. "I'll have to look into whether there've been any deaths on the premises. As for this guy, I'd say he died in the seventies, by the look of him."

I suspect he's right, based on the clothing and what I've seen in old movies from the period.

I hum thoughtfully. "It would be worth finding out the history of this building and anything that might have been here prior to that."

"Aye. That's definitely a line of inquiry I'll need to pursue."

Mmm. I do like the authoritative way he speaks. He's definitely giving someone-in-charge realness.

Sweet Miz Dolly Parton and all that is gay and holy, did y'all bring this tall drink of sweet tea into my life? If so, hallelujah and praise be!

He's likes some deliciously growly Scottish version of Karl Urban come to life in front of me, and I'm very much here for this.

So is my libido, which has decided to come out and take a gander.

I'm a decent height, but Callum's a few inches taller, with an athletic build and wide shoulders. I'd love to strip off that jacket and everything else to see what's under it all. It'd be like opening the best Christmas present ever, I just know it.

I glance up at him and put a bit of a flirt into my tone. "Do you happen to have any plans after this?"

He glances at the ghost who's kind of zoned out and gone quiet now that he's shared his message with me.

"Are you seriously hitting on me right now?" he asks incredulously.

"Well, I'm sure not flirting with him," I say, jerking a thumb toward Mr. Seventies Ghost. "I prefer my men to still be breathing." I smile. "Don't worry, he's not bothered. He's not fully with it, if you know what I mean."

Callum studies the ghost apprehensively. "Is that... normal?" He lifts a hand and squeezes the bridge of his nose. "Christ, what am I even asking?"

"Aww, sugar, I'm getting the sense all of this is new to you, isn't it?" I ask sympathetically.

He grunts. "Sort of."

"Well, I'm more than happy to explain some things to you." I bat my lashes. "What do you say to grabbing a drink with me? I'm sure there's one of those delightful British pubs around here somewhere. There seems to be one on every block here in London. My Uncle Nathaniel would be tickled pink if he visited, and he'd probably buy a beer in each and every one of them," I admit with a chuckle.

He crosses his arms. "I'm going home and planning out my line of investigation for tomorrow."

That calls for my best pout. "Well, now, that doesn't sound very fun. Besides, you have questions don't you?"

I dangle the bait because I can see it in his eyes, he wants answers.

Our ghostly friend suddenly exits stage left and disappears through a wall.

Callum does a double take. "The fuck?"

I wave a hand dismissively. "Nothing to worry about, darlin'. He's just finished talking to me tonight."

I reach into my pocket and pull out two wrapped pralines, offering him one. "Would you like a Preister's praline? They're delicious. I brought 'em all the way from Mobile, Alabama."

He eyes the treat and then me. "You're a bit of an odd one, aren't you?"

I shake my head sadly. "It seems my Southern charm isn't working on you, huh, big fella?"

Shrugging, I open one of the pralines and pop it in my mouth with a happy hum.

I'm confident his curiosity is going to make things go my way before long.

His face shifts into a look of frustrated bafflement. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Beau Montgomery, gay ghost whisperer extraordinaire, darlin'," I say with a wink. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained is my approach to life, that's why I'm asking you out. You're just my type, and I'm just a lonely tourist in London who sure could use a handsome fella like yourself to

show me around.” I tap the side of my nose. “My gaydar tends to be pretty accurate. I like to consider it a side talent I got along with The Gift.”

I can see him wavering so I sweeten the pot.

“In fact, this might be fate, big fella. After all, I could help you with this little investigation of yours.”

He arches an eyebrow. “Why do you think I need your help? I barely even know you.”

“You could use my help because you can’t communicate with spirits and I can. As for the second part, isn’t that a cryin’ shame, sugar? I guess we just need to take some time for you to *get* to know me. A drink at the pub sounds like a good start to me.” I add in another wink.

He hesitates and I press my advantage.

“What’s the harm of one little old drink and a bit of conversation? If you’re not interested in what I have to offer, then we can both go our separate ways after that.”

He steps closer to me and now I can smell his woodsy cologne. It gives me a heady rush.

Good golly, Miz Dolly, he even smells sexy.

He clears his throat. “Fine. One drink. That’s it. As for anything else, including working together, don’t get your hopes up.”

I grin. “Well, honey, I was born with The Gift and now have twenty-nine going on thirty years of experience with the supernatural. I can teach you a thing or two if you give me a chance.” I gesture one hand around me. “After all, that poor fella we saw isn’t the only spirit haunting this building.”

Callum’s eyes go wide again and he darts his gaze around the room. “There’s more?”

I nod.

“Fuck me,” he grumbles.

Boy howdy, would I like to. Or rather, him fucking me.

Everything in due course, Beau.

I flutter my eyelashes at him. “So then, about that drink...”

He scowls but relents. “Aye, you’re on.”

CHAPTER FIVE



RULE #69: DO NOT LET YOURSELF BE SEDUCED BY THE SUPERNATURAL!

Spectral entities can sometimes be quite appealing, but don't give in to temptation! Attempting to seduce the supernatural is a bad idea and should be avoided. When you're overcome with lust, reason vanishes, and this is the perfect opportunity for a spirit to take advantage of a vulnerable living body. Some of the more serious cases of possession happen to those whose nether regions have gotten them into trouble. While ghosts may be able to experience pleasure—see theories on ectoplasm emissions in Appendix A—they aren't likely to satisfy a living person's physical needs. Use your social skills and find someone with a heart that's still beating to get your rocks off with. Otherwise, you might be the one subjected to an exorcism!

*—ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines
(Revised Edition)*

CALLUM

"This place is nice," Beau says, his bright green eyes roving over the pub with interest.

For the hundredth time, I'm asking myself why I let this beautiful but odd man talk me into a drink.

But I already know. Beau's the first person I've met who can also see ghosts. The fact that he can hear them too is useful and might help me resolve this case a lot faster.

And fine, I admit it. I've always been a sucker for a pretty face, and damn if his isn't downright gorgeous. Those big green eyes, framed by thick, fair lashes, drew me in the moment our gazes locked. His features are almost graceful, like they were painted on by a master, and his pouty full lips give me all kinds of ideas. His clothing choices are somewhat questionable and his total ease in the face of the supernatural is beyond baffling, to say the least, but I can't deny that he's piqued my interest.

I lift my pint and take a sip as I glance around. "Aye, it's not bad."

The worn-in Victorian pub looks every inch its age, but it's cozy and tucked away on a quiet side street, so it's not overcrowded tonight. The dark wood interior and brass finishings lend the place a bit of refinement, while the worn-down tables and chairs and the odd jumble of framed pictures on the walls give it a homey, lived-in feel. There's also a blaze crackling in the fireplace and keeping the space toasty.

To my surprise, he opens the small bag he's been carrying and pulls out a Polaroid camera, snapping a picture of the bar.

"I didn't know anyone still used those," I say.

Beau admires his newly developed print and tucks it away in the bag with the camera again. "I appreciate old classics, and the Polaroid camera is definitely one in my book."

"If you say so."

He ignores me and leans forward, eyes sparkling. "Y'all have so many fascinating buildings that are just stuffed full of history. Most everything back home in Alabama isn't more than a century or two old." He smiles and rubs his hands together gleefully. "I want to visit some of the haunted pubs in the city. From my online research, it looks like there are quite a few."

I frown. He actually wants to seek out ghosts *for fun*? Definitely an odd one.

It's time to get down to business. "Tell me more about your, em, abilities."

He flashes a dazzling smile that nearly knocks the breath out me, and I have to tell my dick to simmer down. It's been ages since I've found myself

attracted to anyone, but now is not the time.

In all honesty, there's never been a good time for relationships for me. Being a workaholic dedicated to my job, I discovered a lot of men grew tired of my frequent absences and ghosted me, pun *not* intended, within a couple of months.

Then, after my brush with death turned my life upside down, the prospect of dating just became too much. At first, I was grappling with my own mortality, the premature end of my career, and the fact that I could now see the dead. For nearly a year, I didn't even want to pursue anything with another human. After that? Well, try telling your date that the ghost watching you both get frisky is killing the mood. I still had needs, taken care of by the occasional one-night stand, and while I enjoyed myself physically, each encounter just felt fucking empty afterward.

However, this spark of attraction is a new and surprising problem that I don't need in my life right now, no matter how tempting he is.

Beau takes a sip from his own pint, then leans back in his chair with a coy smile. "Well now, I can give you the short and sweet version or the longer, full-on life story with all the bells and whistles." The smile turns into a grin. "I could even throw in some brass band music at the important parts, if you'd like."

I arch an eyebrow. "Short and sweet, if you will."

He chuckles. "Somehow, I had a feeling that might be your answer. Sweetheart, I hate to mention it, but you don't exactly give off an air of incredible patience."

I scowl but I don't deny it.

He looks around the only moderately busy pub and lowers his voice. "I was born with what my mama likes to call The Gift, but what folks these days would understand as ghost whispering. Did you ever see that old TV show?"

I shake my head.

He shrugs. "Not really important. Essentially, I can see and hear the dead. Been that way since I was old enough to talk. At first, I didn't realize spirits weren't the same as living folks. Where I live in Alabama, there are quite a few lingering souls from all the way back to the Civil War period or earlier." He shakes his head. "When I was little, I made friends with some of them, then later got really good at being able to help quite a few of those poor souls cross over to the other side."

That makes me frown. “What do you mean, the other side? At ExorSquad, I was taught to either trap or zap a ghost, not help it. The company never mentioned anything like this.”

Beau sighs. “I don’t know these ExorSquad folks, but they don’t know their ass from their elbow if they think you need to go around trying to capture or destroy a spirit. That’s plain foolish.”

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. That part never sat quite right with me either. Maybe that’s why I was reluctant to use any of their questionable gadgets designed for offense.

Beau gives me another one of those mysterious smiles. “On the subject of the other side, I’m afraid I don’t have the answers. The next realm isn’t something I can see with my powers.” He leans forward. “Now, this is purely speculation on my part, but my theory is that you can only see the other side once you’re ready to go there. Some spirits describe a bright light or being met with a sense of deep peace and harmony shortly before moving on. Some have told me that they’ve seen a loved one they lost long ago. I reckon some folks would call that heaven, but I can’t say for sure.” He shrugs. “All I know is that there’s something waiting for us once we shuffle off this mortal coil, and I try to help those I can in crossing over. It’s what’s supposed to be natural when we die, but it doesn’t happen right away for some folks.”

I furrow my brows. “And why do you think that is?”

He takes another sip of his beer and taps a finger on the table. “There are lots of reasons spirits can get stuck in this realm. Many hold on to deep regret or a strong sense of unfinished business. Those are usually the easier ones to help.” His expression turns serious. “The more difficult tend to be those who died a traumatic death, one so awful that they’re almost shell-shocked. It’s a small blessing that the majority don’t seem to fully remember what happened when they died. Sometimes they have what I like to call puzzle pieces, little snippets of memory, but usually not a complete picture. And those who died at the hands of another? Well now, those are the ones that often linger because they want justice. Or worse yet, revenge.” He shakes his head. “The latter can be a dangerous line to walk, whether you’re living or dead.”

Now I’m curious. “How so?”

“Because it can eventually corrupt a soul until it becomes a poltergeist, and once that happens, the soul can’t pass on to the other side. At least not,

that I've seen. I don't exactly have a PhD in this stuff, so I can't claim to be the foremost expert. I just speak as I find."

Fucking hell, this man's already educated me far more than the piss-poor attempt at training I received from ExorSquad. What he's saying is simpler and makes a lot more sense.

I take a deep gulp from my pint. "You seem to know a lot about the supernatural, PhD or no PhD."

He gives me a crooked smile. "I've lived with it all my life, so I suppose that's only natural."

"So, Mr. Ghost Whisperer, what brings you to London, then? It's a far way from Alabama."

He grins. "True, and a fact my mama calls to remind me of daily since I arrived." He schools his features into a more serious expression. "The big professional reason is that I host a podcast called Beau's Boos and Beyond. It focuses on the supernatural and sharing some of my experience and wisdom with like-minded folks, and I've always wanted to pursue stories outside of my home state."

I make a mental note to check that out later.

"The other reason is more typical. I haven't seen much of the world and wanted to travel outside my little bubble back home in a big way. England's always been interesting to me. Mama and I watched all the seasons of *Downton Abbey* together. And lately, we've been binge-watching *Midsomer Murders*." He pauses. "There can't *really* be that many murders in the countryside here, right?"

I choke back a laugh. "If movies and TV shows like those are what have informed your ideas about England, I dare not ask what you think about Scotland."

Beau waggles his eyebrows. "I've seen *Braveheart* and *Highlander*. All I know is Scotsmen in kilts is where it's at, honey."

That manages to get a little snort of laughter out of me, which he seems delighted by.

I school my expression. "Let's get back to the whole ghost whisperer thing. You're seriously not put off by any of this supernatural stuff? Doesn't any of it scare you?"

It sure as shit scared me when I saw my first ghost after being medically brought back to life.

Beau considers my questions as he drains the last of his beer. “Like I said, it’s always been a part of my existence. I guess you could say it’s just something I live with. Admittedly, it can be difficult at times. As you might imagine, ghosts wanting my attention while I’m with fellow members of the living can create quite a pickle if I talk back to them. Folks think I’m off my rocker, but if I don’t respond, some spirits can become awfully darn persistent in ways that can get disruptive. I’ve certainly lost some friends and partners over the years because of it.” His smile turns sad. “For those who can’t see beyond the Veil and remain oblivious to those spirits still lingering in this world, it’s mighty hard to understand what you and I can see plain as day. That expression *seeing is believing* is most people’s reality.” He arches an eyebrow. “I imagine you haven’t met anyone who gives a whole lot of credence to what you might have told them about being able to see ghosts, now have you?”

I have to grimace at that. He’s not wrong. Liz believes that *I* believe I can see them, but she won’t be jumping on the supernatural phenomena bandwagon anytime soon.

“My former colleagues think I’ve gone round the bend.”

I quickly learned that allegiances don’t last when you share something like being able to see the supernatural.

Beau tilts his head. “Former colleagues?”

I drain the rest of my pint and look away. “I used to be a detective inspector for the Met. It was my life until I was involved in an incident while on the job. I was injured pretty badly, enough that my heart stopped beating for nearly two minutes until the EMTs arrived and were able to revive me.”

That’s when I started seeing things that I’d never seen in my entire life.

Beau reaches out and takes hold of my hand, startling me. I look into his sympathetic eyes, mesmerized once more.

Damn this inconveniently timed attraction!

“I’m so sorry that happened to you, honey. It must have been terrifying.”

His hand is warm on mine, and it sends a tingle of awareness up my arm that I try to ignore.

I don’t like to talk about my accident, so I skip over the details. “I was in hospital for several weeks, and once I was released, I went through an even longer recovery period. The review board at work decided that, based

on the medical reports and future prognosis, I needed to take early retirement on an ill-health pension because I couldn't perform my duties as a police officer anymore."

Beau tilts his head.

I shrug. "Nerve damage and a broken leg that now has a shit ton of pins in it to hold it together and doesn't quite work like it used to. Most of the time, the nerve damage from my spinal injury doesn't impede my daily life, but when I have a flare-up, which I can't always anticipate, mobility issues can last for long stretches of time. In other words, I can't reliably chase criminals anymore."

"You miss it," he says with an air of understanding.

I swallow thickly. "I do. It's why I finally signed on with ExorSquad, no matter how shady they seem, to get involved in paranormal investigations. Once a detective, always a detective."

Beau leans forward on the table, eager interest written all over his face. "I've always had a thing for famous fictional detectives and private investigators. Sam Spade, Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and so on." He rests his elbows on the table and his chin on his clasped hands. "Tell me more about ExorSquad and how you got involved in this type of work."

I give him a quick rundown of the past few weeks since I found their advert and how I underwent training before being tossed in the deep end to sink or swim. By the time I'm telling him about some of the gadgets they gave me, he's laughed himself silly, tears streaming down his cheeks, and I can't stop the flush of embarrassment evident on my cheeks.

"I'm sorry, darlin'. I really shouldn't laugh, but those ExorSquad folks clearly don't know what they're doing. Do you have that handbook on you?"

I sigh wearily, take it out of my pocket, and hand it over. He starts flipping through it, alternating between chuckling to himself and scoffing in disbelief.

"Do you want the good news or the bad first?" he asks when he finally looks up.

"I have a feeling neither are particularly good."

"Well, the semi-good news is they got one or two things right when it comes to ordinary spirits. Most of this is a bunch of hooey though. Now, poltergeists are an entirely different story, and some of the warnings they provide are worth considering if you ever encounter a malevolent spirit. As

for their so-called spirit extraction equipment they gave you, I suspect they won't do much of anything useful."

I lean an elbow on the table and squeeze the bridge of my nose. "I had a feeling that might be the case. The only gadget that seemed decent was the EMF reader."

Beau nods with approval. "They can be helpful, but I find they tend to work best when handled by folks like you and me. My theory on this one is that we supercharge the devices with our own affinity for the supernatural, which resonates with the spiritual energy around us. A kind of bidirectional flow, you might call it. Usually, ordinary folk don't get a strong reaction on an EMF reader unless there's poltergeist activity involved."

"What do you think about the spirits in Salon de Spin? Are any of them poltergeists?"

"Well now, I can't say for sure, but I didn't feel the kind of energy I'd expect from a poltergeist, and I have encountered a handful of them over the years." His expression becomes deadly serious. "They are *not* something to take lightly. They can be very dangerous." Then he grins at me. "But one thing your handbook got right is that there's safety in numbers, darlin', and that's yet another reason you should let me team up with you on this investigation."

He says that last part with a triumphant glint in his eyes.

I make a noise of protest, but he holds up his hands and continues.

"Now, now. I don't want any payment. You secured this job, the money is yours. All I ask is that you be my official tour guide whenever we have some free time each day. That way, I get a sexy man who knows the city to show me around and I've got you covered if there's anything truly dangerous going on in that building."

"I don't think ExorSquad's going to like me bringing in a partner who doesn't work for them on this case."

He blinks at me innocently. "Do they have to know?"

I ponder that. It's not like Gerald is providing a lot of oversight on this case, so I've been free to handle things how I see fit. Beau's right. He doesn't really need to know if I'm working with someone else.

This whole thing sounds a bit too good to be true though. "I don't know."

Beau flutters those stunning golden eyelashes at me. "The more I communicate with the spirits, the more their stories may become clearer.

Those who are willing, I should be able to help cross over when that happens. Then you'll be able to give your client a neat and tidy end to this case."

Fuck me, but he's making good points I can't really argue with. And this way, we don't need to destroy these ghosts like ExorSquad expects me to. We can actually help them. My gut instinct is screaming that *this* is how it needs to be done.

Plus, working side by side with a gorgeous guy doesn't sound so terrible either.

Nothing's going to happen but you can enjoy the eye candy.

"All right," I say with a growl. "I'm willing to let you assist me just so long as you remember that *I'm* the one in charge."

"Unless there's a poltergeist," he retorts.

I narrow my eyes. "Unless there's a poltergeist."

He reaches out his hand. "Shake?"

Warily, I clasp hands with him.

My physical reaction is immediate. If I didn't know better, I'd swear we set off sparks when we touched.

I really hope I'm not going to get burned in this arrangement we've made.

Beau beams at me with delight.

"I look forward to working with you, big fella."

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CHAPTER SIX



Welcome back to another episode of Beau's Boos and Beyond! Today, I'm answering some messages I've received from my wonderful listeners—thank you all for supporting the show.

My first message is from Mark who wants to know: Can spirits possess the living? That's a great question, sugar. The answer, however, is rather complicated. Possession of the unwilling is very rare. Those horror movies about folks being possessed by demons and whatnot are mostly pure fantasy. A spirit would need to be very powerful to possess anyone who didn't want to let them in. We're talking high-level poltergeists here. But like I said, incredibly rare. I've never encountered it myself, although I've read a handful of accounts from over the centuries.

Now, the other category of possession is really more about mediumship. Someone with abilities similar to mine can choose to be a vehicle through which a spirit communicates with the living. For short periods of time, that is. I find mediumship to be quite physically taxing. Only in special circumstances would I agree to such a request from a spirit. But remember, the medium is always the one who retains full control and can boot the spirit if they start misbehaving.

—Beau's Boos and Beyond, Episode 7

BEAU

Bright and early the next day, I stand outside the B&B and glance at the clock on my phone, tapping my foot in eager anticipation. Working with a sexy former detective-inspector-turned-paranormal-investigator on a case sounds nearly as fun as sightseeing—and I’m planning to get him to help me a bit with that last part.

Do I have other ulterior motives, like getting into his pants if I’m lucky?

Why yes, yes, I do. But Mama always says I’m the maestro of multitasking in our family, so I’m not worried.

But I can genuinely help him with this case. Sure, I wasn’t planning on spending my time in London doing this type of work, but my instincts tell me I need to stick close to the sexy, grumpy Scotsman I’ll be working with.

I can’t restrain a grin when I spot him striding down the sidewalk in my direction, all handsome in dark jeans and leather bomber jacket.

When we left the pub last night, he told me he’d pick me up in the morning so we could get started on some of the legwork the case requires. Since he knows his way around the city far better than I do, I was more than happy to oblige.

“Good morning, darlin’,” I say, offering him a sunny smile.

What I really want to do is touch him again, experience that deliciously electrifying spark we share. I don’t know if it’s tied to the fact that we have the same supernatural ability or if it’s simply pure, raw sexual attraction. All I know is that I *like* it and I’m all aboard that train.

I just need to convince him to be the conductor.

He’s holding himself back for now, I can tell. I’m a gentleman, so I would never force or coerce someone I’m interested in. But Mama always says I can charm a raccoon into giving up trash. Surely I can charm Callum into realizing just how combustible we could be together.

Right?

“Morning,” he replies tersely.

“Where to?”

“A coffee shop a couple of blocks from here has good coffee and decent Wi-Fi.” He gestures to the messenger bag he’s toting. “I brought my laptop along so we can do some research on Salon de Spin’s address. That should help us learn more about its history and what might have been there in the past.”

“I could go for a cappuccino right about now. Sounds good to me, big fella.”

He arches an eyebrow as he studies me. “What’s that all about?”

“What?” I ask, the picture of innocence.

He narrows his eyes. “The whole *big fella* thing.”

“It’s called a term of endearment?” I offer with a bright smile.

He flushes a little and looks away. “Let’s just focus on the case.”

Before I can respond, he starts striding down the sidewalk like a man on a mission. I have to hurry to keep up.

In short order, I follow him into a bright and airy coffee shop with plush armchairs situated around small, low-lying, round tables. I manage to nab us two chairs together when some customers get up to leave while Callum orders our drinks.

When he comes back, he hands me my cappuccino and sets down his own Americano, then pulls out his laptop. The coffee shop’s bustling at this time of the morning, but fortunately, I found us seats in a slightly quieter corner, away from any prying eyes.

Callum boots up his laptop, and I scoot my chair closer so I can see the screen better.

“First, we need to look into the local council planning department to get more history on the site. Thankfully, a lot of this has gone digital in recent years.”

He pulls up the Planning London Datahub, which, he explains, holds planning information from the appropriate authorities.

I enjoy my cappuccino while he types in the address and starts skimming through some of what he finds. A quick glance at the screen tells me I don’t know what most of this means.

Callum is scanning things quickly, though, his gaze intense and focused.

I shiver and have to wonder if he’s just as focused and intense as a lover. If he brings *that* kind of energy to the bedroom, I can’t wait to experience it firsthand.

He interrupts my wayward thoughts by pointing an index finger at the screen. “Look at this bit.”

I scan the line he points at. It’s the record of a planning file for the cycle studio’s building, which only went up in the early 2000s. Prior to that, the file indicates the site was occupied by a car park.

“What’s a car park?” I ask, deliberately cheeky.

He frowns. "A place you can park your car."

"Ohhhh, a parking lot."

He narrows his eyes. "A *car park*."

I wave a hand and try to hide my grin. "Tomato, tomahto."

He rolls his eyes and mutters about troublemaker Yanks.

Teasing him an itty bit sure is fun. It's kind of like poking a bear that's dangerous looking on the outside, but total teddy bear on the inside.

I've already got Callum's number whether he knows it or not!

Turning his attention back to the computer, he pulls up an attached historical map of the street. "It looks like the car park was there since some point in the 1990s, maybe earlier." He takes a deep drink of his Americano and rubs his lovely square chin, which already sports a hint of stubble. "We need to find out how long back 'earlier' was. I have a feeling it wasn't always a car park, but this database only goes back a few decades."

"Agreed, honey. Spirits typically stick close to the place where they died. I'm not entirely sure what has anchored these particular spirits, but most of the ones I've encountered tend to follow this rule."

Callum's eyes go distant in thought. "That means someone died at that site, and based on our ghost's outfit, probably at some point in the '70s."

I nod. "More than one, I'm afraid. From the supernatural energy levels I felt, I'd say it's at least half a dozen or more."

He runs a hand over his face. "Christ, multiple spirits. Fabulous."

"That just means more folks to help out. Look on the bright side."

His lips twitch as he studies me. "I've never met anyone quite like you before."

I beam. "Well, I like to think I am one of a kind, sugar."

He leans back in his chair and strokes his chin in thought. "We're going to need to take a trip to the National Archives to delve deeper."

"Now that sounds interesting. Tell me more."

"It's the national archive of the UK government, but more importantly for our purposes, it holds documents dating back over a thousand years. And it's open to the public and free to visit." He gives me the first genuine smile I've seen on his face, and it transforms him.

Be still my beating heart. Is he a history nerd too?

Swoon.

And good golly, Miz Dolly, I thought he was devastatingly handsome when I first laid eyes on him, but when he smiles, he's positively deadly for

my heart.

Trying not to make a fool of myself, I clear my throat and will my burgeoning erection to take a hike.

Time and place, friend.

“Over a thousand years old?” I marvel and shake my head. “See what I mean? This is proving to be an even more fascinatin’ trip than I ever expected.”

Callum closes his laptop and returns it to his bag. “We’re not tracing the site’s history quite that far, I’m afraid.” Draining the rest of his Americano, he gets to his feet, a look of focused determination in his eyes. “It’s down in Kew, in Southwest London, so we need to catch the Tube to get there. Let’s go.”

A short while later, we get off the train at the Kew Gardens stop and walk a little ways until Callum stops in front of a rather imposing building. Unlike a lot of the architecture I’ve been drawn to around the city, this place is much newer and has a modernist bent to its design.

I follow Callum inside to the reception visitor area and then we take some stairs to a help desk. The staff person there listens to Callum’s explanation of what he’s looking for.

The older gentleman hands him a form. “You’ll need to get a free reader’s ticket to consult original documents.”

Callum completes the necessary paperwork and we’re both issued reader’s tickets.

“I recommend consulting with one of our archivists in the Research and Inquiries room,” the older gentleman says, pointing us in the appropriate direction.

Callum makes a beeline for one of the archivists’ tables and repeats his story. She gives him an apologetic frown. “The more detailed records you’re probably looking for aren’t held here. You’d need more information on the actual building at the site during the time period you’re inquiring about. A name, a business license, permits, etc. Without that, it’s a bit like searching for a needle in a haystack, I’m afraid.”

Callum frowns. “Don’t you have licensing records?”

“Some, but it depends on what sort of license and which authority issued it, especially for London commercial premises. You’ll want to look in the local borough archive relevant to that street address first. Once you get some more particulars about any building during that time, any potential

owners or operators, years of activity and such, then we can look more specifically for any documents the National Archives might hold pertaining to the business.”

Callum sighs. “I suppose I was a wee bit overeager and jumped the gun.”

She smiles. “Don’t worry, we get that a lot. Lots of people think we can access what they need a lot quicker than is realistic. But once you do have more information to narrow our search, feel free to come back. We’ll be happy to help you then.”

We thank her for her time and head out into a blustery October day that has me zipping up my jacket right quick.

My stomach rumbles and I rub it, smiling. “What do you say to a bite of lunch?”

Callum looks at his phone and frowns. “I suppose it’s about that time, eh? Let me check something first.” He taps something into his phone and nods to himself. “The borough archive we need isn’t open today, but it is tomorrow.”

“Does that mean we have the rest of the day free to do some sightseeing?”

“I guess so,” he agrees, a tad warily. I don’t hold it against him.

I find his grumpiness just gets cuter and cuter the more I get to know him.

“So about that lunch...” I waggle my eyebrows.

He rolls his eyes and strokes his chin. “Do you like curry?”

“What, like Thai curry or Indian curry?”

“I know a good curry shop that we can get to on foot if you don’t mind walking a wee bit.”

I straighten my purple bow tie and give him my most winning smile. “Lead on, darlin’. I’m more than happy to get some exercise. It’s so lovely that so much of this city is walkable. It’s not like that back home in Alabama.”

As we walk, Callum asks, “What’s it like there?”

“Well, Mama and I live in an outlying suburb of Mobile, which is teeny tiny compared to London. It doesn’t have a whole lot in the way of walkable parts, and public transportation isn’t anywhere near as extensive or efficient as what y’all have. Folks need to drive to get most anywhere,

and in the dripping hot, steamy heat of summertime, you definitely want the air-conditioned ride rather than trying to walk anyway.”

“I can’t imagine living somewhere without decent public transportation. But then again, I’ve only lived in Edinburgh and London, which both have excellent rail and bus services.”

“It sure is handy, I would agree. But having a car can be nice, especially when going anywhere outside of a city.”

“Yeah, I’ve hired a car a few times for some road trips, and once when I went camping with some mates.”

I chuckle. “I think I’d be a menace on the road trying to drive on the opposite side of what I’m used to.”

Callum snickers. “You’re probably right. I’ve witnessed my fair share of traffic collisions involving tourists trying to drive over here.”

I laugh. “I’m not surprised. To be fair, *you* might find it just as challenging to drive in our countries.”

“Touché.”

We arrive at the curry shop in short order, and it’s not anything like I expected. Then again, I’m not even sure what I *was* expecting about a place to eat that’s called a shop.

It’s not a sit-down restaurant like I had figured, but more like a deli counter that you order from. And the menu is also a little bit strange. Callum notices my confusion and leans closer.

Lordy, my biscuits are burning! Callum smells divine. There’s a layer of soap on top of his woodsy aftershave today. I fight the urge to fan myself.

“Trust me,” he rumbles in that sexy Scottish accent. “Get yourself an order of curry and chips, plus a kebab.”

Still befuddled by how delicious he smells, I end up taking his advice.

A short time later, we’re both handed our takeout containers.

“Follow me,” Callum says. “There’s a nice little park not far from here where we can enjoy our meal outside.”

Once again, I follow, a bit like a baby duckling, and we find a nice empty bench in the park a few blocks away. It’s still a lot colder than I’m used to, and the park is not especially busy. Eating outside in this weather would not be my first choice, but when in Rome.

I open my container and stare at its contents, a little baffled. The meat on a skewer is evidently the kebab, but the big steaming pile in the middle

appears to be french fries covered in something that smells like curry and looks a lot like brown gravy but with the thicker consistency of white gravy.

Callum's already taken a forkful of his and chews it with a grin. When he swallows, he says, "Go on, give it a try. I think you'll like it."

When he points that sinfully sexy smile in my direction, I think I'll do just about anything he asks of me.

"Like the divine Miz Dolly Parton, I've never met a potato I didn't like. Here goes nothin'!"

Gingerly, I use my wooden fork-like utensil to skewer a large french fry, covered in curry. I pop it in my mouth and immediately moan.

"Oh my stars! That is amazing," I manage to say once I finish chewing and swallow.

"Right?" Callum says with a smug grin.

Too stinkin' cute.

Callum continues. "A good curry shop is a godsend when you've had a bit too much to drink the night before. A lot of them stay open quite late, into the wee hours, making good money off the patrons who stay at the pubs until closing. A belly full of greasy grub helps you sleep off the worst of the hangover."

I take a bite of the slightly spicy and wonderfully juicy chicken on my kebab and nod approvingly. No hot sauce needed this time around.

"I'll take your word for that, sugar. But let's get back to our earlier conversation. You know about where I'm from, but you haven't told me anything about yourself and where you hail from."

He wipes his mouth with a napkin. "My parents live outside of Edinburgh in a quiet commuter town that's an easy train ride into the city. I grew up there, but moved down here for uni. I knew I wanted to join the Met early on, so I decided to go to school close by so I could go straight into the four-year Detective Constable Entry Programme right after I got my degree."

"The Met?" I ask.

"Metropolitan Police."

I study him carefully. "Do you miss home? Scotland, I mean."

He considers that for a moment. "I miss my old stomping grounds. I know Edinburgh like the back of my hand." His lips quirk as his gaze roves over me in a way that has me tingling all over. "You'd probably love it.

There are loads of old buildings there, and no skyscrapers are allowed to be built. It's preserved the historical look and feel of the city more than most."

"I'd absolutely love to visit someday," I gush.

I stop just short of asking him to take me there.

Don't get ahead of yourself, Beauregard Jeremiah Montgomery, Mama's voice chimes in my head.

I clear my throat. "Ahem. But London's home to you now?"

He considers that, looking more serious than I expected.

"Aye, it was for a long time. My job tied me to the city in deep-rooted ways, but ever since I had to take early retirement, I've felt more disconnected, almost semi-alien here. Like the city doesn't quite fit me right anymore." He sighs. "I've considered moving back to Edinburgh to be closer to my family and in a place that's always felt familiar and comfortable to me. I only really came to London to pursue the law enforcement career I wanted. Now, it just doesn't hold the same draw it once did."

I can tell this is a sensitive subject for him. "I've read a lot about Edinburgh, and I wouldn't be surprised if that city is teeming with interesting ghosts. I'd love to visit someday," I offer, keeping my voice light.

He snorts with laughter. "Aye, you might be right. After all, they used to have public executions on the Royal Mile back in the day. A boatload of blood's been shed there over the years."

I rub my hands together. "You've convinced me. I'm going to have to add that to my travel bucket list."

When we finish our meal in companionable silence, we toss our empty takeout trays in the garbage, which he calls a *rubbish bin*, and that just tickles me pink.

Callum turns and crosses his arms over his big, muscular chest.

Okay, I don't fully know if it's quite as muscular as I think. His jacket leaves a lot to the imagination. But from what I saw when we were inside the archives earlier when he took it off, I'm pretty convinced he's got a very nice physique under his shirt.

But I won't know for sure until I manage to get him out of his clothes.

Which needs to happen real soon. For science.

"We've got time for some of that sightseeing you mentioned. Where would you like to go?"

I don't need any more prompting to whip out my phone and show him my list.

He favors me with an amused smile. "We're not doing all of that in one day. But come on, I've got a good idea of where to start. You might as well enjoy yourself while you can because we're returning to Salon de Spin tonight. I think we need to work on interrogating some ghosts."

Is it wrong that I'm just as excited about that as I am about having him as my own personal tour guide this afternoon?

Honey, if it is, then I don't want to be right.

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CHAPTER SEVEN



RULE #101: WHAT TO DO IF YOU'RE POSSESSED

We'd like to say "Stay Calm and Carry On," but accomplishing that probably won't be easy. In most cases of possession, a partner or another team will need to perform an exorcism. We're afraid this is not a negotiable matter.

Any spirit powerful enough to possess the living needs to be taken out fast, even if that means destroying the host. Please be aware that success rates for exorcism rituals vary. ExorSquad Ltd. is not liable for consequences of said exorcism or any bodily injury incurred while possessed.

*—ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines
(Revised Edition)*

CALLUM

"Were you waitin' long, sugar?" Beau asks as he strolls up to where I'm leaning against the side of the spin studio building.

There he goes with those weird little endearments. I still can't tell if they're an Alabama thing or a Beau thing.

“No. You’re right on time.”

He beams at me. “Of course I am. Mama says a gentleman should always be punctual.” He winks. “Especially when it comes to his *personal* engagements.”

He says it all prim and proper but with a coy glint in his eyes, and my lips twitch as I hold back a laugh.

Beau Montgomery is a real character. He mystifies me on far too many levels and is way too enticing to my libido. I really need to put some distance between us or this could all blow up in my face.

He bats those fuckin’ gorgeous eyelashes at me. “I had a lovely time this afternoon. Thank you for escorting me.”

We’d done a tour of the Natural History Museum. I’ve always enjoyed that place myself, and I figured it might appeal to someone as quirky as Beau. And I was right; he’d oohed and aahed his way through the exhibits, clutching my arm to get my attention and pointing at things.

It had been bloody distracting. Those damn tingles I get whenever we touch left me on edge and wanting the whole time. For some damned reason, I can’t stop thinking about this strange man who busted his way into my life from out of nowhere.

And fuck me, I like it when he touches me.

But I’m sure as hell not telling him that.

“Come on, let’s get inside. We’ve got a lot of work to do tonight.”

Beau stands at attention, giving me a mock salute and a wink. It’s utterly ridiculous, especially when he’s wearing trousers with cat faces printed on them and a bow tie that matches.

I roll my eyes and unlock the door, ushering him in ahead of me and then making sure to lock up behind me. This time I brought a torch for us to navigate the dark hallways rather than relying on my phone yet again. Everything is still and quiet as we pass through the space, and my eyes and ears are at attention the whole way.

When we reach where the supernatural activity has largely taken place, Beau walks around the room, humming softly to himself.

“I sense a different presence here,” he tells me. “It’s stronger than the one from last time.” He grins at me and rubs his hands together. “That means we might be able to get some real answers out of this one.”

He walks to the front of the room, the mirror panels doubling his reflection, and stands with his hands on his hips.

“I know you’re here, so why don’t you do us all a favor and come on out, hon? I’m sure you’ve been dyin’—no pun intended—to share why you’re so upset that you’ve taken to haunting this here building. Now’s your chance to tell your story. Let it all out. Mama always says, trouble shared is trouble halved.”

Beau’s tone is sweet and inviting, and he’s laying it on thick, but somehow I can’t look away. He’s downright mesmerizing. I have a sinking feeling that, if he keeps firing that deadly level of charm in my direction, I’ll end up doing whatever he wants. Because who the hell would want to say no to him?

The dimmable lights in the room start to flicker and a chill races up my spine. Once again, I reach for the baton I no longer carry and then curse under my breath. The temperature drops and my breath fogs in the air.

My hackles rise.

Beau, however, yawns loudly and appears completely unimpressed.

“Sweetie, I’ve seen these types of amateur-hour theatrics hundreds of times. Haven’t you got something more original you could show us?”

That’s when the phantom image of a strobe-lit disco ball materializes above our heads, casting fractured rainbows of light across the walls and floor. The stereo system suddenly crackles to life on its own and the song “Boogie Wonderland” starts playing. Mimi’s spin studio is quickly starting to look like a disco club.

Beau slow claps. “Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about, sugar. A little originality makes so much more of an impression, doesn’t it?”

A ghost, semi-translucent in appearance, joins us.

It’s the spirit of a man I would guess to be in his late twenties, and he’s wearing the tightest pair of white bell-bottoms I’ve ever seen and a gold lamé top that looks like a cross between a blouse and a dress shirt. His entire look basically screams *Saturday Night Fever*.

His fair hair is layered in a kind of feathering look around his face a la Barry Gibb, and he crosses his arms while he studies us both.

“Well, hello there, sir,” Beau says. “I’m Beauregard Jeremiah Montgomery, but my friends call me Beau, and I sure do think we could be friends. And who might you be?”

The ghost’s mouth moves, and Beau turns to me with a clear-eyed gaze.

“He says his name’s Jonathan Turner.”

I open my notepad and jot it down.

He turns his attention back to the spirit. “Well, Jonathan, pleasure to meet you, although I do wish it was under friendlier circumstances. Would you want to tell me what all this is about? Why have you and your friends been disrupting these spin classes?”

The ghost looks me up and down then turns back to Beau, moving his mouth.

I frown. “What did he say?”

Beau chokes back an amused laugh. “He... uh... wants to know who you are and if you’re single.”

My mouth drops open. “What the fuck?”

Beau’s lips quirk. “Jonathan here thinks you’re handsome.” He winks at me then turns back to the ghost. “I entirely agree, honey. Beyond that gruff exterior, he’s got a good heart and a smoking hot bod—from what I can tell, anyhow. I haven’t personally been able to see him gloriously *au naturel* just yet, but I’m workin’ on it.”

The ghost’s face moves like he’s chuckling, and I choke on my own saliva. “What the hell is going on right now? Are you and a *ghost* flirting with me at the same time?”

Beau shrugs. “So it would seem.” He cocks his hip and gives me a sultry look. “But I do believe I have an edge here since I’ve still got a heartbeat and a dick that works.”

Jonathan says something and Beau holds up an apologetic hand.

“My apologies. You are correct, some ghosts *can* experience the supernatural equivalent of an orgasm.” He turns to me. “My theory is that most ectoplasm’s just ghost jizz.”

“Sweet Jesus,” I gripe. The ghost cocks one eyebrow and his lips move.

Beau crosses his arms and stares him down. “No, Jonathan, we do *not* want a demonstration, thank you very much.”

I close my eyes and squeeze the bridge of my nose.

“Christ on a bike, how is this my life?”

“Aw, come now. You should be flattered that we both find you so attractive.”

“He’s been dead for fifty-odd years!”

Beau nods approvingly. “Indeed, and apparently he still has excellent taste.”

The ghost smiles smugly and says something to him.

Beau grins. “Jonathan agrees with me on that point.”

I turn to the ghost, moving past the seriously weird side of this conversation and homing in on the more critical detail.

“So, when you were alive, you were gay? Bisexual?”

Being out in 1970s Britain wasn’t easy.

Beau pipes up. “Jonathan says he’s gayer than John Iman’s character on *Are You Being Served?*” Beau blinks. “Whoever that is.”

My mind races. A gay man in the ’70s, dressed in gold lamé and tight pants. What exactly was on this site at that time?

“What kind of place was here when you were alive?”

Beau focuses intensely as Jonathan talks to him.

“He can’t remember the name, but he does remember dancing.”

I scribble in my notebook: *Nightclub?*

“Why are you haunting the spin studio?” Beau asks. “Whatever used to be here is long gone.”

I wait impatiently as Jonathan talks to Beau, whose eyebrows slowly wing up higher on his forehead. Then he turns to me.

“Jonathan says he’s not entirely sure why he’s stuck here. It’s like he and the others were in a kind of limbo, similar to a slumber, for a long time. Then things changed and they woke up once construction was finished on this building. But it still took quite some time for them to manifest enough spiritual energy to do any real haunting.” His lips twitch. “Jonathan says he’s one of the strongest in the group, by the way.”

“If he’s the one making music play out of nowhere and projecting a phantom disco ball on the ceiling, then I’ll take him at his word on that.”

Jonathan puts his ghostly hands on his hips and mouths off to Beau about something.

I watch as Beau’s eyes widen and then he turns to me.

“He says they have unfinished business.”

I don’t like the sound of that or the worried look in Beau’s eyes.

“What kind of unfinished business?” I ask warily.

Beau gulps. “Um, remember how I told you there’s usually two types of unfinished business?”

“Aye.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure it’s the second kind.”

Fuck. A desire for justice or revenge.

All signs point to the fact that poor Jonathan and the other ghosts haunting the place didn’t die a natural death.

With that, the music cuts out, and just as suddenly as they appeared, Jonathan and the phantom disco ball are gone.

“Bloody hell,” I mutter, running a hand over my face. “This is getting more complicated by the minute.”

My mouth sets in a grim line. “We need to find out more about whatever the hell used to be here and how these poor souls perished.”

Beau bites his bottom lip, worry reflected in his eyes. “He said something else.”

“What?”

His voice comes out in a shaky whisper. “The door wouldn’t open. We couldn’t get out.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT



On tonight's episode, I'll be talking about the science versus paranormal debate when it comes to the supernatural.

Anyone involved in the study of the supernatural has probably found themselves embroiled in one of these often quite heated discussions. Now, I want to preface things by saying that I'm not anti-science whatsoever. Scientific inquiry has led to a lot of important progress for humanity.

However, I don't believe every single phenomenon can be measured or assessed using scientific method. Indeed, how does one measure that which exists neither fully here nor fully elsewhere? Spirits that manifest in this realm reside on a plane that is a kind of in-between space. That's why only some folks can see and hear them.

Let's talk about a few well-known cases when this debate has come up...

—Beau's Boos and Beyond, Episode 10

BEAU

Bright and early the next morning, Callum and I head to the City of Westminster Archives Centre.

“How can I help you?” asks a bespectacled, middle-aged archivist with a name tag that reads *Jane*.

Callum provides the current address of Salon de Spin, and Jane asks, “Has the street always been called that?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

She favors me with a kind smile. “Certain street names and numbering have changed in the city over time.” She studies the address and nods to herself. “Let’s try looking at a modern street index and then compare it with an older one. We’ll see if things line up.”

She pulls the current one up on her computer and then an older one from the 1950s and points at her screen. “See here, the street name stayed the same, but the numbers of the address don’t quite match.”

Callum frowns. “Will that create a problem in finding out more about the location’s history?”

“Not necessarily. Wait a moment while I go and pull a larger Ordnance Survey map for us to use for comparison.”

We follow her over to a large table where she tells us to wait while she disappears behind the counter and into the back rooms. About ten minutes later, she reappears and lays a large map out on the table.

“This is a map from the early nineties.”

Using a magnifying glass, she helps us locate the address. On this map, it’s simply a blank rectangle labeled *car park*.

I try not to laugh, remembering my parking lot versus car park moment the other day.

Callum nods. “We heard that there might have been a car park here before the current building was erected, so it’s helpful to confirm that, but we don’t know how long the car park was there.”

“And we’re trying to figure out what was there prior to the car park,” I add.

Jane taps her chin thoughtfully. “All right. Let me go and pull a few older maps.”

She comes back with several. The 1980s map still shows us a car park, and Callum jots that down.

“So it stayed that way for at least two decades,” I murmur.

Then Jane lays out a map from the 1970s next, and that’s when we hit pay dirt.

The rectangle at our address this time around isn't empty. Instead, there's an abbreviation that says *Textile WHSE*.

I point to it. "What does that mean?"

Jane leans in closer. "A textile warehouse, by the look of it."

Callum's eyes glint with triumph. "Yes, that's what we needed. How can we find out more about this warehouse?"

"For what period of time?" Jane asks.

"Let's say from 1970 to 1980."

She clears the maps away and has an assistant return them for her then leads us back to her computer.

"For that, we'll need to switch our avenue of inquiry to our Building Control and Building Act records."

"What might we find in those records?" I ask.

"Anything from building applications to architectural plans, inspection reports, correspondence, and district surveyor records. We might even be able to find information on whoever owned the building during that decade." Jane types away on her keyboard for a couple of minutes and then smiles. "Hold on a second. I've located a file number that might be relevant. We haven't managed to digitize a lot of this older stuff yet, so I'll have to grab the physical file for us to look at."

She scurries off into the back, and we wait.

Callum sits in his chair and jiggles his leg nervously with barely contained energy. Watching him, I can see how much he loves investigating. Having a mystery to solve and tracking down clues really seems to do it for him. Even I have to admit, I'm having a lot more fun than I expected. When I help spirits, I'm usually all by my lonesome, so having a partner is a bit of a novelty for me. Also, my past efforts never involved this amount of mystery and intrigue. I'm not sure that I have the makings of an amateur sleuth, so I defer to Callum's expertise on such matters, but I'm thoroughly enjoying myself.

Our archivist returns and carefully sets down a brittle, yellowed file on the table. "This is the earliest information I was able to pull."

When she opens it up, we see a Victorian-era warehouse plan from the 1880s. It's for a four-story building with a brick exterior and big arched windows. The blueprints indicate an old freight lift, service corridors, storage rooms, and what I think was a basement or cellar.

"This place would have been massive," I marvel.

We continue to carefully flip through the documents and soon find an old black-and-white picture of the warehouse in the early 1890s.

“Wow!” I whistle. “How cool was that?”

Jane’s eyes shine with similar enthusiasm. “Lots of warehouses like this were built when industry was booming in London. However, by the 1960s, a lot of the industries that had been critical during the Victorian era moved elsewhere or ceased entirely. Buildings were abandoned and fell into disrepair. There’s every possibility this one might have been torn down to make way for that car park in the 1980s.”

Callum looks at her sharply. “Is it possible someone might have renovated and repurposed the building for commercial use? I was thinking it may have been used as a nightclub in the ’70s.”

Well, that would certainly explain our disco-loving ghosts and their musical preferences, that’s for sure.

Jane closes the file and selects another from her stack, this time from the 1970s. “Very possibly,” she says. “Quite a number of old warehouses were converted for nightlife purposes during the late ’60s and early ’70s. Others were then later renovated into lofts or condos. Sadly, many were simply torn down.”

Callum and I both gulp as she carefully opens the file. Immediately, she locates an application for alterations to the premises that’s dated early in 1977. The attached plan shows ground-floor renovations, and a note in the plan’s margin indicates *existing basement to remain*.

“So it definitely had a basement,” Callum says.

Jane shrugs. “I can’t say for absolute certain, but given the paper trail we’ve looked at so far, it seems highly probable. How developed that space was, I couldn’t say.”

I study the document. “It looks like part of this application might be missing. I don’t see anywhere that says what the alterations were for.”

We continue flipping through the rest of the file but aren’t able to discover any additional information on why the warehouse was renovated.

The archivist, bless her, isn’t ready to give up.

“Our next best option is to look through some of our local newspaper indexes. If we type in the street address, we might find some hits,” Jane tells us.

She sits us down at two of their guest computers to get to work, and Callum and I spend a tedious two hours going through old digitized

newspaper articles.

This part of investigation is far less exciting.

My eyes are starting to glaze over a little from all the material I've been trying to skim through when Callum gets a hit.

"Look at this."

I lean closer and read the headline:

New Night Club, The Midnight Vault, Opening Friday.

We decide to look at the planning drawings in more detail, which is where we see that a bar was proposed for installation, as well as toilets and updated electrical work.

"Looks as though they only fitted out the ground floor," Callum says.

We return to combing newspapers, using the club name in our searches. I lose track of time and find myself nearly nodding off when Callum cries out, startling me.

"What?"

He practically bristles with excitement. "I think I found what happened to our ghosts."

I jump out of my chair and stand behind him to look at his screen.

There, I see in stark print: *Mysterious Fire Destroys The Midnight Vault.*

Oh, dear.

CHAPTER NINE



Fall is here at last and as we all know, that's everyone's favorite spooky season! So curl up with a warm mug of apple cider or a pumpkin spice latte while you enjoy today's episode.

I have an interesting email question of the week from Samantha, who writes:

Dear Beau, I love your show and tune in every week—Aw, thanks, hon—and this is my first time writing in. My grandmother passed away a few weeks ago—I'm so sorry for your loss—and I'm definitely heartbroken, but I also know she'd been suffering and it was her time. I miss her a lot. Ever since the funeral, I've been having dreams of her. It's like she's visiting me from the great beyond. The dreams are so vivid, different from my usual ones. Is it possible she's actually visiting me? Or is it just a creation of my mind in this time of grief?

Thanks for reaching out, Samantha. It's quite common for folks to dream of their loved ones after they pass. Are some of those dreams actual visitations? That's hard for me to say for certain. What I can say is that I believe it's possible. Your love for your grandmother and your desire to see her leave you more open for her to be able to reach you in some way. Dreams are easier for spirits to access than face-to-face manifestation. Now, does this happen often? I'm not sure. It's not something I can prove or

disprove. But if it gives you comfort to think it's her taking time to visit you in your dreams, then I say hold on to that feeling because it's beautiful.

—*Beau's Boos and Beyond*, Episode 17

BEAU

As I continue reading, my heart breaks. In 1979, six people were trapped in the building when the fire started and were unable to make it out, succumbing to the blaze.

Those poor, unfortunate souls.

Callum frowns. "This is odd." He points to a paragraph of the article. "Right here, it says the investigators thought the fire started a good hour after closing, so I'm not sure why there were people still in the building. From what all these documents tell us, the upper floors weren't in use because they just renovated the main floor."

"More cost-effective for them, I'm sure," I offer.

"It certainly wouldn't pass code today by any means, but not uncommon for the time, no doubt."

Callum leans back in his chair, studying the computer screen with a serious look on his face.

"Is it just me, or has this whole case just gotten a whole lot more complicated?" I ask.

"Aye, that it has. There's more to this than we first thought, and it looks like we're going to need official help."

I move to sit next to him. "Official? You mean with ExorSquad?"

He grimaces. "No, but I'm going to have to inform Gerald about this, and I know he won't like it." A strange mixture of emotions flicker across Callum's face before he turns away. "We need to contact my ex-partner, Liz, at the Met. She's Detective Chief Inspector Wu now and can pull information for us. There had to have been an investigation into the fire, but I can't access those official records without her assistance."

After Callum takes pictures of the news articles we found, we pack up and thank Jane for her indispensable help, then leave the building.

"Once Liz tracks down the file, she should be able to see if there are any documents available. And then we may need to visit some archives again,"

Callum says.

I frown. “Why? Wouldn’t they be at the police station?”

Callum shakes his head. “You have to understand, there are case files dating back over a century. Once enough time has passed, a lot of stuff is moved to different archives for storage.”

“Fascinatin’. I suppose that makes a lot of sense now that I think about it.” I give a sheepish smile. “Most of my knowledge comes from movies and television shows.”

The mix of horror and disbelief on Callum’s face is downright hilarious. “Bloody fucking hell. From here on out, only trust what I or Liz have to say when it comes to policing.”

I grin at him with absolutely no remorse. “What about that *Hot Fuzz* movie? How real is any of that?”

He narrows his eyes at me. “You’re just taking the piss now, aren’t ya?”

I give him a playful pat on his arm. “Simply keeping you on your toes, darlin’.” Then I rub my hands together. “I say there’s no time like the present. Why don’t we invite your old partner out for lunch?” I give him my most winning smile. “We could go to that haunted pub I told you I wanted to see.”

I’m also dying—no pun intended—to meet his ex-partner so I can grill her for information on Mr. Broody McSexy-Pants.

The look of consternation he sends my way is one I’ve had directed at me by many over the years.

“You want to eat lunch in a place where there might be ghosts flittering about?”

I keep an innocent expression on my face. We’re talking butter wouldn’t melt, honey.

“Sure, why not? They might have some *very* interestin’ stories to tell. Besides, this time of day we aren’t likely to be overrun with them. They tend to prefer nighttime hours.” I beam. “And this is killing two birds with one stone. I get my tourism of the day in with you, and we get your ex-partner helping us move this investigation along. Win-win.”

Callum heaves a weary sigh. “Fine. I’ll give her a call.”

He pulls out his cell phone—or mobile, as they like to call it here. Being the respectful gentleman that I am, I step away to avoid eavesdropping, but I wouldn’t have really caught all that much anyway. The conversation is

remarkably brief, and soon enough, he puts away his phone and comes over to me, his face giving away nothing.

I bet he was a good interrogator of perps when he was a DI.

That would be hot to witness in action.

“What’d she say?” I ask.

“She’ll meet us there in an hour.”

I rub my hands together gleefully.

Hoo boy, not only am I going to get to visit one of the supposedly most haunted pubs in London, but I’m also gonna get to meet Callum’s ex-partner. This day is getting better and better.

We end up on the Tube again, which I must say is proving awfully convenient, although I don’t find going up and down so many stairs and escalators to be very enjoyable, especially when it’s so crowded with far too many people. But like Mama always says, we can’t direct the wind, but we can adjust our sails.

We get off at Sloane Square and walk a ways, eventually turning off a broad, elegant street and onto a narrow, slightly claustrophobic one. Our destination, The Grenadier, is tucked into a row of pale stuccoed houses and would have been easy to miss if we hadn’t been focused on finding it. Its exterior is definitely weathered from time and the elements, and a dark green door sits beneath the hanging pub sign. On the whole, it seems a bit unremarkable to me.

“That’s it?” I ask dubiously. I was expecting something grander, I suppose.

“Wait until we get inside,” Callum says. “Old places like this can surprise you. They often hide some of the best secrets beneath an unassuming exterior.”

I take his word for it.

Once we enter, we’re immediately hit with much warmer air, which is a nice reprieve from the chill wind outside. There’s a sizable crowd already sitting down for lunch, and the clink of glasses and the creak of old floorboards punctuate the murmurs of low conversation.

The ceiling in here seems awfully low, and I’ve noticed that’s pretty common in London’s older buildings. It gives the space a tighter and more intimate feel, but just like the last pub Callum took me to, it’s wonderfully cozy. The air smells of beer, wood polish, and something mouthwateringly delicious coming from the kitchen.

My stomach rumbles in eager anticipation.

We sit down at an empty table, and I look around me with keen interest. There's some vintage framed memorabilia on the walls, including old photographs that look like they date back to the Victorian era, just like our elusive building that was once the site of our haunting.

I open my bag and pull out my Polaroid, taking a picture of one wall that piques my interest. Flapping the print with one hand, I look up to see Callum studying me.

"Do I have something on my face, or am I just that darn good-looking?" I ask him playfully.

"What are you going to do with all those photos?"

"I'm making myself a scrapbook when I get home."

His lips twitch. "It's going to have an... interesting mix of pictures."

"I'm hoping to get one of you too."

He holds his hands up, palms facing me. "No way, no how."

My shoulders droop. I'll probably have to settle for sneaking one while he's not looking.

"I don't see any ghosts," Callum says, lowering his voice as his eyes scan the place. "Thank fuck for that. Otherwise, I might lose my appetite."

"Let's have us a nice meal together and not be ornery." I give his arm a squeeze—and hubba-hubba, that's some very firm muscle I feel under there.

I'd sure like to take a bite out of those biceps.

A server comes to our table, and we order the lunch special of beef and ale stew with homemade bread. We skip the alcohol since we're on the job.

"Shouldn't we have waited to order until your friend arrives?"

Callum waves a hand dismissively. "Liz isn't one to stand on ceremony. If she wants a bite, she'll order something. She won't be fussed if we already have our food, trust me."

I squirm a bit uncomfortably in my chair. Ordering when not everyone has arrived is against my entire upbringing, but this is a different country, and I remind myself that I can't impose my Alabama upbringing on them.

Instead, I choose to trust that Callum knows his ex-partner best and that we won't offend her by eating first.

I fiddle with the napkin on the table and ask Callum the question I've been wanting to ask since almost the moment we met.

"You're definitely single, right?"

He chokes on his water and sets down the glass. “Where did that come from?”

“Well now, I think I’ve made my intentions fairly obvious, darlin’, don’t you? After all, you even remarked on the ghost and me both flirting with you last night.”

Callum’s cheeks flush.

He’s so precious I could eat him up with a spoon!

“We’re working together on this case, not *dating*,” he grits out between clenched teeth.

I rest my elbows on the table and lean forward a little, cupping my chin in my hands as I watch him. “Who’s to say we can’t do both, darlin’?”

He sputters but isn’t able to say anything coherent, so I continue my wooing campaign.

“Callum, sugar, I’m gonna be entirely upfront. I find you devastatingly handsome. Your whole tall, dark, and grumpy vibe kind of does it for me.” I study him with hooded eyes. “And there’s been an undeniable spark between us from the get-go—even you can’t disagree with that.”

To my supreme delight, it looks like he’s wrestling with himself on this one—and I think his interest in me just might be winning out.

Well, paint me pink, cover me in rhinestones, and call me Dolly! Things are looking up. I wish I had a pair of pom-poms right about now because I’d be ready to celebrate this little but hard-won victory in style.

“As far as I’ve been able to tell, you’re single, and I also happen to be unattached, so there’s nothing stopping us from exploring this mutual attraction.” I wave a hand between us. “However, Mama brought me up to be respectful, and if you’re not single, I apologize for being forward and presumptuous.”

He sighs. “That’s right, I’m single. But I’m not looking to date.”

“How come?”

“Dinnae go there,” he grumbles, his accent coming out a lot more pronounced than usual.

“Come again, honey? Dinny? What’s that mean?”

“Dinnae. Go. There,” he growls out.

I blink a few times. “Oh! *Don’t* go there, you mean?”

His eyes narrow. “That’s what I said.”

“Not exactly, sugar, but I catch your meaning. And I have to retort by asking why in the blue blazes not?”

“It’s complicated,” he says.

“When isn’t it?”

He has no response to that one.

I smile smugly. “I rest my case, darlin’.”

He points a finger at me. “You’re only here for a short amount of time. What’s the point of getting involved?”

Oh, sweet summer child. Let me school you on a few things.

“Why, getting to know each other better, of course.” I lower my voice and trot out my most inviting tone. “If you play your cards right, we can enjoy some deliciously hot monkey sex—and often—while I’m here.”

He stares at my mouth in a very promising manner and then straight into my eyes with a look of defiance. “I’m not really a fan of one-night stands.”

Staring me down like that, not giving an inch? Hot. As. Hell.

“Me neither, sugar. Consider it more of a friends-with-benefits arrangement. For now. After all, you and I share some unusual common ground. Trust me when I say it can be quite difficult to find other folk with our unique abilities.” I shrug. “And maybe our little fling could become something more serious. But we won’t find out until we try.”

He gives me a skeptical once-over. “Are you saying you’d be open to considering a long-distance relationship that crosses an ocean at the very least?”

The disbelief is palpable.

Evidently, he still does not know who he’s dealing with.

He’s highly underestimating my general level of tenacity. When it comes to him, I fully intend to be like a tick on a hound dog—he isn’t going to be able to shake me off easily.

Not when all my special senses are telling me that our meeting was no mere coincidence in the grand scheme of things.

I look him dead in the eye. “For the right person, yes.” I lick my lips, drawing his eyes to them again. “For the right person, I might even consider permanently relocating. If you catch my drift.”

I’ve finally thrown down the gauntlet, and it’s now up to Callum to decide whether to pick it up or not.

Our server arrives at that awkward moment and sets down steaming bowls of stew with freshly baked bread and butter. I have to swallow hard to make sure I don’t drool on myself.

With my enticing proposition still lingering between us, we subside into silence and eat our meal.

The rich, savory flavor of the beef and ale stew has me wanting to walk right into the kitchen and ask the cook for the recipe. I savor each bite slowly and then sample the fresh bread and butter, which pairs with it so well that I find myself humming in appreciation as I eat.

We've only had a few mouthfuls when a petite woman with dark hair cut in a fashionable bob and wearing a gray pantsuit hurries over to our table and joins us.

I set down my spoon and get to my feet, pulling out a free chair for her and gesturing for her to sit. "Ma'am."

She gives me a curious and vaguely amused look. "What's this all about?"

I flash my most genteel smile. "Where I come from, a gentleman always stands when a lady enters the room." I gesture at the chair again. "May I?"

She gingerly sits down, and I push her chair closer to the table and sit back down.

She sends another bemused glance my way. "And who are you, if I may ask?"

"Pardon me. I'm Beau Montgomery, a tourist from Alabama, and Callum's temporary partner in a supernatural investigation." I reach out my hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

CHAPTER TEN



RULE # 32: GHOSTS CANNOT CROSS RUNNING WATER

The theory that running water prevents spirits from crossing those geographic locations has existed for, as far as we can tell, centuries. Several ancient manuscripts repeat this rule, and while there is some anecdotal evidence that running water may impede some spirits, one should not assume that all ghosts are vulnerable to this restriction.

Editor's note: It has been disproved in at least fourteen different cases that we're aware of. Do not rely on running water for protection. In particular, do not assume a river, stream, or garden hose will save you.

*—ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines
(Revised Edition)*

CALLUM

“Elizabeth Wu,” my ex-partner says, shaking Beau’s hand. “But my friends call me Liz.”

Beau beams at her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miz Elizabeth.”

“Aren’t you sweet,” Liz says. She turns to me, her lips twitching. “You’ve been busy since we last talked.”

I sigh in resignation. “Beau happened to stumble upon my investigation and offered to lend his particular skills to the case.”

“And what might those be?” Liz asks.

Beau opens his mouth, and I know what he’s going to say before he utters a word.

“I’m what folks like to call a ghost whisperer,” Beau explains in a cheerful tone. “I can see and talk with the dead.” He jerks a thumb in my direction. “This one here only developed the ability partway after his near-death experience, so he can see but not hear the spirits. In my case, I was born with The Gift, as my mama calls it, and I’ve always been able to do both.”

The server swings back by at that moment.

“Hi, there. I think I’m going to need a pint and a bowl of that stew to process this conversation,” Liz says.

The server takes her order and disappears.

Liz’s overall credulity as both a DCI and a level-headed person in all things is definitely being pushed by the way this conversation has swerved.

“We genuinely appreciate you giving us some of your time today,” Beau says politely.

Liz shifts awkwardly, but she nods. “Anything for Cal. He and I were partners for fifteen years, and there aren’t many blokes better than him when it comes to having your back.”

My heart squeezes in my chest, and I’m oddly touched by her words.

“Why don’t we set aside my lack of belief in the supernatural for the moment, and you two tell me what you want my help with.”

Liz Wu doesn’t like to beat around the bush any more than I do, so I quickly recount where the path of our investigation has led us thus far. By the time I’m done, Liz’s meal has arrived, and she tucks in like a starving woman.

“God, that’s good,” she says after swallowing a few mouthfuls of stew.

Then her sharp gaze lands on me. “So, I’m assuming it’s my access to case files that you’re wanting?”

I hold my hands up in the prayer pose. “Any help you can give us would be great. For now, we’re just trying to get some details on what happened, who the deceased were, and what the outcome of the investigation was.” I

frown. “I’d also like to take a look at the arson investigator’s notes if you can find them.”

Liz sips her drink. “If there were casualties in that fire, I’m fairly confident we’d still have some records. Although fair warning, they may not be terribly well organized, and not all documents are likely to still be around this many years later.”

“I’m fully prepared for that. Any information you can find will be useful.”

“Hmm. You’ll probably be best off to start with the London Fire Brigade. Most of their records that far back are held in the London Metropolitan Archives. You should have no problems getting your hands on incident reports, but you won’t be able to get access to any arson investigation files under a Freedom of Information request. I’d need to step in as a DCI, and that’s when things could get more complicated.”

I wince. “Gotcha. If you can check into it on your end first, that would be great. If there was a criminal case, then the Met will have records, and those will be faster for you to track down.”

She nods. “I’ll be able to suss out if there were any criminal trial proceedings following the investigation, but it’ll take me some time.”

“No worries, luv. I’ll write up all my notes this evening and email them to you. They should help you with searching through the Met database.”

Liz and I shake hands, and she finishes the last of her stew then leans back in her chair and sips her pint.

She darts a look between me and Beau. “So, tell me more about you two. Are you an item?”

I nearly choke on my tongue. “No we’re bloody not.”

Beau bats his lashes at Liz. “I’m working mighty hard on getting into Callum’s pants—and maybe even into that curmudgeonly heart of his.” He winks at me after saying that.

I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose.

Liz laughs. “Ooh, tell me more. Cal needs to get laid in the worst way.”

My eyes snap open and I glare at them. “Hey!”

They ignore me.

“Agreed. I think that might be partly why he’s such a grump.”

Liz’s eyes sparkle and she leans closer to Beau. “Oh, I do like you.”

Beau grins.

I groan.

How did this conversation get so derailed?

“Callum and I are both single and the attraction is very much mutual,” Beau continues, “so I don’t see what the problem is. But convincing him is proving more difficult than nailing Jell-O to a tree.” He shakes his head sadly. “I’ve been putting all of my gay Southern charm on full blast, but it’s not having the effect I was hoping for. Yet, anyway.”

Liz snorts. “Fair warning, Cal can be a bit of an arsehole when it comes to romantic relationships. He’s entirely too oblivious to other people’s emotions and can really put his foot in it.”

“Is this Shit on Callum Day or something?” I gripe.

Liz flicks my forehead lovingly and turns back to Beau. “He’s actually a big sweetheart, a total softie underneath it all. You should see him with my girls. But you’ve got to dig your way through a lot of layers of grouchy, grumpy bastard until you get to the good stuff.”

Beau grins. “No kidding, honey. But don’t worry, Mama says I’m a force to be reckoned with. I’ll keep digging until I strike gold.” He rubs his hands together. “In fact, I’m gonna channel all of my inner Miley Cyrus and take a wrecking ball to those walls of his, every single one.”

The very notion is rather terrifying and also a wee bit intriguing. Beau’s already managed to get under my skin like no one ever has, and in such a short span of time. What more could he possibly have in store for me?

And is it wrong that a strange, traitorous part of me is almost... excited?

Liz leans forward confidingly. “It took me *eighteen bloody months* to get him to trust me as his partner at the Met. You’ve got your work cut out for you, but you have my full endorsement. Wreck away!”

Now I’m regretting that I didn’t order myself that pint. I need some fortification for sitting through their conversation.

“I’m sitting right here, you know. But please, do go on talking shite about me,” I grouse.

They, of course, ignore me again.

“What about his past relationships? Any pointers there, Miz Elizabeth?”

She chews on that. “Honestly, the whole time we worked together, he never dated anyone more than a couple of months before they buggered off.”

Beau nods in commiseration. “I can see how that could happen.”

They both look at me pityingly and I can’t help but feel self-conscious.

“All right,” I admit. “A lot of the time, it wasn’t them, it was me. But that’s mostly because the job was my life. After all, solving crimes and bringing perpetrators to justice is more important than making dinner on time.”

Right?

They both give me more pitying looks, and I cross my arms over my chest like a petulant toddler. But I feel like I have a right to at this moment.

Beau taps his lips thoughtfully. “He hasn’t had a relationship since he quit working with you?”

Liz darts a glance in my direction, uncertainty written all over her face.

“Not that I’m aware of, but then again, Cal and I don’t see one another or talk as often as we once did.”

Her eyes fill with sadness, and my chest tightens uncomfortably.

Beau reaches out a hand and pats Liz’s on the table.

“I’m sure that not working together anymore must have been difficult for you both. It seems like you had a strong bond and still do. You both worked together for so long that it must have been a real challenge to adapt when you couldn’t anymore. You both have suffered from that, and you have my deepest sympathy.”

Liz’s gaze meets mine, and then we both look away.

Sometimes I forget that Liz lost almost as much as I did when I was forced to take early retirement.

For a long time, I was too steeped in my own self-pity and misery and couldn’t see beyond that. Liz tried to offer me support and a shoulder to cry on, just like she always has, but I pushed her away.

I can admit that now, especially after she’s agreed to help us even though she doesn’t believe in any of this supernatural crap.

I owe her an apology, dammit.

“I’m sorry,” I say, my voice coming out a little hoarse. “I know it’s a bit late for me to say this, but I do appreciate all that you did to try and help me after the accident. Hell, you’d just given birth to two babies and you still came to see me every day in hospital. I was a self-pitying bastard at the time, and I lashed out at the one person I really shouldn’t have. Please forgive me.”

Liz’s eyes glisten with tears, and she downs the rest of her pint. “Glad you recognize you were a complete and utter git.” Her voice softens. “But you had a right to be. You’d lost the one thing that was most important to

you, and through no real fault of your own. After all, it was an accident. It's a risk that comes with the job."

She's partly right about that. The temporary partner I'd been with hadn't known what he was doing, and I took unnecessary risks when following a suspect into a dilapidated old building. Liz had always been the more level-headed one in our partnership, and I knew better than going off half-cocked—but I still did it anyway. I've only got myself to blame.

Took me a while to admit let alone accept that.

Liz sniffs and wipes away any remaining tears. "Enough maudlin shit. Let's talk about fun stuff. Namely, I think you need to give this lovely young man a chance. I mean, look at him. He's gorgeous."

Beau tweaks his black bow tie patterned with little orange jack-o'-lanterns and preens under her praise.

She eyes him up and down. "His fashion sense is certainly... *unique*, but he's young, hot, single, and interested in you, for some godforsaken reason. Besides"—she points a finger at me—"if you can both see... ghosts or whatever, then it sounds like you have a lot more in common than meets the eye."

Beau beams with satisfaction. "You're so right, Miz Elizabeth. It's quite rare in this world to happen upon others who have The Gift. I was telling Callum that earlier." He sighs dreamily. "I can't help but think it was the hand of destiny that brought us together. After all, in what other situation would the two of us meet? Me, Southern boy from Mobile, Alabama, and him a sexy Scotsman from Edinburgh."

I wince. "It's not *Edinburg*, it's Edinbur-uh," I pronounce carefully.

"What he said," Beau replies cheerily.

Liz snickers. "Oh, you wouldn't believe how many times he corrected me on that when we first met. He's quite particular and can get tetchy about certain things."

"I've noticed that about him," Beau says, "but I also absolutely *love* a challenge. I pride myself on the fact that I have an uncanny ability to get under people's skin. In this case, I'm hoping it works in my favor and ignites the flame of desire that's simmering between us." He waggles his eyebrows for emphasis.

Liz's eyes gleam with interest. "Now I've never heard *that* about Cal before."

"Well, ma'am, let me tell you my theory."

“Kill me now,” I mutter to myself.

Beau continues undeterred. “You know how intense he gets when he’s investigating something?”

Liz bobs her head. “You’re telling me! I don’t know how many times I had to force him to take a break or to clock out. Once he gets in the zone, it’s hard to get him out of it.”

Beau smiles widely, flashing his teeth. “Well, I suspect he brings the same kind of intense energy to his lovemaking. And that’s something I feel I need to find out for sure. For science.”

I choke on my water.

Liz smirks at me. “You’ve got your hands full with this one.”

“Too bloody true,” I mutter.

Beau gives her two thumbs-up.

Liz gets to her feet and tosses down a five and a tenner for her meal.

“This has been lovely, boys, but I’ve got to get back to the office. Walk me out, Cal?”

I follow Liz outside. When she turns to face me, her expression’s serious. “I don’t know how you feel about this young man, but I was serious when I said I like him.”

I don’t even know what to say to that.

“Are you having fun with this investigation of yours and working with him?” she presses.

I swallow the lump that suddenly formed in my throat. “Aye.”

She smiles. “Thought so.”

I sigh. “Look, I’m attracted to him, all right? I admit it. But he’s only over here for a short while. He doesn’t live here, and very soon he’ll be heading back to Alabama.”

“Probably,” Liz agrees, “but that doesn’t have to be the end. There’s a chance neither of you will want to call it quits just because of a little bit of ocean between you. You can’t predict what the outcome will be, but I can guarantee that, if you don’t even bother to try, then nothing will happen. It’s better to have loved and lost and all that bullshit than to have never even tried. Look at me and Doug. Remember how long he tried to get me to go out with him? I was so sure it would never work.”

I chuckle in recollection. “Aye, he was quite dogged in his determination.”

“Thank bloody fuck for that,” she says. “Or else I would have missed out on the love of my life. But like you, I can be a bit of a prickly porcupine when it comes to other people getting close. I kept telling myself I didn’t have the time or inclination for romance, but he managed to convince me otherwise, and I’m so grateful that he did. Life’s good and I have an equal partner who’s an all-round decent human being.”

She’s right. Doug’s a stand-up guy.

“That Yank in there seems like a real sweetheart. He might be exactly what you need. Don’t be an arse and push him away, or you might end up regretting it a lot more than you think.”

I give her a hug and watch her as she walks off.

And I can’t help but think that Beau might be right and we did meet one another for a reason.

And if that’s the case, maybe I shouldn’t try to push him away.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN



Did I ever tell y'all about the time I danced with a ghost at my senior prom? Well, that's a mighty fond memory of mine.

As a gay teenage ghost whisperer growing up in Mobile, Alabama, I didn't exactly have a lot of gentlemen clamoring to be my date to prom. I know, it's a cryin' shame. I'm a delightful date, if I do say so myself. Now, I wasn't gonna let any haters get me down, so I went with a couple of my fellow queer friends. We had us a little rainbow posse—and believe you me, there's safety in numbers.

Anyhow, I'd seen a ghost around our school on occasion. A young woman from the 1950s, wearing a formal dress of some kind. But that night, she showed up and actually spoke to me for the first time. See, she'd died at her very own prom. Some kind of food. She ate something at the buffet that had nuts in it and that was the last thing she remembered. But she was still holding on to regret over not being able to dance a single dance at her prom. So I offered to make her wish come true.

Now, I'm not saying it's easy to dance with a ghost. It was a clumsy mess, and I know I looked a fool to everyone who couldn't see her. But it gave her the closure she needed and she thanked me so sweetly before she moved on. To this day, it's still a memory I cherish.

BEAU

When Callum returns from seeing Miz Elizabeth off, the expression on his face is one I can't quite read.

"Is everything all right, darlin'?" I ask him softly.

He clears his throat and flushes a little. "Aye, everything's fine."

"So how long do you think it might take her to get the information?"

"Maybe a day or two, possibly longer, depending on how hard it is for her to track it down based on what we can provide her and what other obligations she has on her plate at work."

Callum glances at the time on his phone. "I need to get going. I've got a meeting with the owner of Salon de Spin to update her on my progress." He shoots me an apologetic look. "I think it'd be better for you not to join me until I let her know I've brought you on board to help out."

I smile. "No problem. I understand." I muster my resolve and go for broke. "But, since it's gonna take Miz Elizabeth a while to track down what we need, what do you say to a date this evening? Just you and me."

For a moment, Callum looks like a deer in headlights.

Then he manages to shake it off and heaves a sigh of capitulation. "Fine, but I'm not promising anything beyond that. We clear on that?"

"Of course, sugar. We're gonna have a grand time, just the two of us."

"That's what I'm worried about," he mutters.

I start humming Miley Cyrus's "Wrecking Ball."

We leave the pub and make plans for Callum to pick me up at the B&B around six o'clock and then decide what we should do.

I stroll at a leisurely pace and end up doing some window shopping and browsing in a couple of used bookstores on my way back to the B&B. When I return, my lovely host offers to serve me afternoon tea, but I politely decline, telling her I want to take a little nap and then freshen up for my evening plans.

She seems tickled pink that I've got a date and offers me plenty of words of encouragement.

When she toddles off to watch her afternoon shows on the telly, as she calls it, I head up to my room and close the door.

I'm not entirely surprised when I see a familiar person—or rather, spirit—standing in the corner of the room.

I sit down on the bed and cross my arms. “You know I can see you. Why don't you just tell me what you want?”

The man stares at me for a long while. There are dark circles under his eyes, and his face is rather gaunt. My best guess is that he's in his late thirties, and the beanie, pajamas, and knit sweater he's wearing suggest he had been sick toward the end of his life.

“Who are you?” I ask him gently.

“Alistair,” he finally says.

“What are you doing here, Alistair? Why haven't you moved on?”

He looks down at the floor. “I need to watch over her.”

“You mean Miz Edna?”

He nods.

“Why?”

“She needs me. She's all alone now. I promised I'd look after her...” His expression twists with pain. “But then I couldn't.”

“It's okay to feel sad about not being able to stay and watch over her. But I'm sure if you mean as much to her as she seems to mean to you, she'd want you to move on and not linger here for her sake. If you look closely enough, you'll see it, the place where you're supposed to go.”

He scowls at me and disappears.

I sigh to myself. I can't force him to move on, but for Miz Edna's sake, I want to help him. But I can only do that if and when he's ready.

Yawning, I text Mama real quick to let her know I'm alive and we'll talk soon, then I get undressed and crawl into bed for a little afternoon nap.

When I rouse myself two hours later, I decide to freshen up with a nice, hot shower and a cup of instant coffee that I make in my room. Then I prepare to get dressed. I'm not quite sure where Callum's taking me this evening, but I opt for a pair of dark gray pants, a deep purple dress shirt, black suspenders, and a gold sequined bow tie that Mama gave me for Christmas.

I think Miz Dolly Parton would approve.

It's a little ostentatious, but I like it. And I feel like my first date with Callum Fraser is an occasion that warrants a little special sparkle to mark the occasion.

I'm just coming down the stairs when I hear Miz Edna let Callum into the front parlor.

"You must be Beau's date for tonight."

"That's right. I'm Callum Fraser."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Edna White."

"You run this place all by yourself?"

I pause to listen at the threshold of the room.

Miz Edna's tone saddens a little. "I do now. My husband, William, and I ran this place together at first, but he passed away twenty years ago."

"I'm so sorry," Cal says.

"It was a heart attack. My one consolation is that it was fast. He didn't suffer for long. He didn't linger..." She trails off. "Not like my son."

A chill goes down my spine. I think I know who Alistair is now.

I move into the room quietly and join her on the couch. "I'm sorry for eavesdropping a bit and I'm so sorry for your loss, Miz Edna. May I ask what happened?"

She pulls out a handkerchief and dabs at her eyes. "Leukemia. We tried all sorts of treatments, but they didn't take in the end. Some folks told me to put him into a hospice center, but Alistair wanted to come home with me. And I wasn't gonna let my baby spend his last days in a place like that. So we came home. I was able to get him some good in-home hospice care, and we kept him as comfortable as we could. Then, after three months, he passed away in his sleep one night."

"I'm so sorry. Truly."

She pats my hand. "Thank you, dear. It's been nearly ten years now. I can't say the grief ever goes away. A parent shouldn't outlive their child, but Alistair was just like my William. They both wanted me to be happy and enjoy my life, even if they weren't here with me. So I've done my best to honor their wishes." She wipes at tears again and blows her nose. "I'm sorry for being a bit of a leaky faucet today."

"Your grief is completely understandable. You'll get no judgment from me. I'm sure your son loved you very much and appreciated all that you did for him, especially at the end."

"Alistair was a good lad," she says.

Then she smiles at me. "He was like you. Preferred blokes to birds."

I laugh.

Her expression saddens. “He had a partner, but when he got really sick, Tony couldn’t handle it and left.”

I take hold of her hand and squeeze it. “Sadly, some people can’t cope with a loved one dying, and they see themselves out of the situation before things get really bad. It can be a form of self-protection, but it’s marked by denial and usually ends up hurting them a lot more later.”

“I’m sure you’re right.” She pats my hand again and carefully gets to her feet. “You two should be on your way. Have fun, all right?”

“We will, ma’am,” I promise.

It’s already dark and much colder when we step outside than it was earlier, and I shiver. To my surprise, Callum offers me his arm, and I’m no fool. I take it and hold on tight.

“You’re nice and warm,” I say, pressing in closer.

“Your landlady seems nice,” he says, ignoring my words.

“Miz Edna’s lovely.” I sigh. “I feel bad because she doesn’t know her son’s spirit is haunting the B&B.”

Callum stops. “What?”

I shrug and tug him along. “It’s not uncommon. He can’t stop worrying about his mother and wants to stay and watch over her. I’m hoping I can convince him to move on before I have to go home.”

“Do you think that’s likely?”

“Hard to say, but he finally spoke to me today. I’ve been trying to get his attention for a while, but he’s been resistant.”

I lean in closer, changing the subject so as not to ruin our date with too much dead people talk. That can be a bit of a mood-killer.

“So, where are we going this evening?”

“I figured I’d take you for dinner down around Southbank. Afterwards, we can walk along the Thames.”

“I like the sound of that.”

He shrugs awkwardly. “It’s been an age since I last planned a date, so my apologies if it doesn’t live up to your expectations.”

The fact that he’s worried about whether I’ll have a good time or not is so sweet. I haven’t had too many dates who’ve worried about that before. Yet another gold star for Callum Fraser in my book.

I smile. “Being alone with you for a whole evening when we’re not working is going to be phenomenal. I just know it.”

“If you say so,” he mutters, sounding uncertain, and I realize he may be a bit more self-conscious than I would have guessed.

But my goal this evening is to draw him out from behind his defenses. I only hope he won’t retreat even further back into that darned shell of his.

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CHAPTER TWELVE



RULE #127: SALT KEEPS SPIRITS AT BAY

Always carry a copious amount of salt on you when hunting spectral entities. Rock salt is preferred, but some have reported moderate success with table salt in a pinch, no pun intended. Use it to form a protective circle around yourself and others. This will not defeat the entity, but it can buy you time and temporary protection.

Note: Pepper does NOT work as a substitute, as some have learned this the hard way. RIP.

*—ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines
(Revised Edition)*

CALLUM

“This place is real fancy.” Beau whistles admiringly as he looks around the little Southbank French bistro I’ve brought us to. He winks at me. “I’d say you’re off to a great start with this date you’ve planned, Mr. Fraser.”

I shift in my seat, both relieved he’s pleased and strangely nervous about spending time with him on a date like this. In fact, all while I was

getting ready this evening, I felt edgy but also full of anticipation.

I don't know what kind of magic Beau Montgomery has worked on me, but I can't stop thinking about him. And I can't stop thinking about what he's said about us being together. And having hot monkey sex...

Our server greets us, and I will my mind to stop sending thoughts in that direction.

We get a bottle of red wine for the table and put in our entrée orders. Then it's just the two of us.

The bistro has a European Old-World flair matched with a cozy intimacy that's clearly designed for couples to dine together. Overhead lights are turned down low, and candles adorn each table, casting soft, warm light all around us.

This place screams super romantic date night.

Fucking hell, Liz. You recommended this place to me on purpose, didn't you?

I was the fool who didn't bother to check the online reviews, which no doubt emphasize the romantic atmosphere of the place.

That belated realization that I've unintentionally taken this date to the next level has me sweating bullets.

Beau leans forward and rests his elbows on the table as he studies me beneath hooded eyes. In the glow of the candlelight, he looks even more beautiful, almost fae-like in appearance. The graceful line of his jaw, his stunning green eyes framed by thick lashes, and his perfect pink lips have me transfixed.

Temptation, thy name is Beau Montgomery.

"Tell me more about yourself, darlin'," Beau says, taking a sip of his wine.

I frown. "What do you want to know?"

He waves a hand airily. "Whatever you feel like sharing."

I clench my napkin in my lap. Fuck. "I'm... erm... not very good at this sort of thing." I'm also seriously out of practice, dammit.

Beau favors me with a quiet smile. "All right. Let's play a little date version of Twenty Questions, then. I'll start, shall I?"

Relief washes over me. Questions I can answer. Spontaneous divulgements are not really in my wheelhouse, and I honestly don't even know what he wants me to talk about. I'm not actually a very interesting person these days. Up until a few weeks ago, I'd been holed up in my flat

licking my wounds for the last few years. Sure, becoming a paranormal investigator—screw that Spirit Extraction Specialist bullshit from ExorSquad—is unusual, but probably not for someone like Beau. What the hell does a man like him see in me?

“Let’s start with an easy one,” Beau offers. “Any pets?”

I blink and relax a little in my chair. “A sassy cat named Poirot.”

Beau’s eyes widen. “After the Agatha Christie detective?”

I nod a bit sheepishly.

“I loved that old show with David Suchet as Poirot!” Beau gushes. “British mysteries are some of my favorites. Like I told you, Mama and I enjoy watching *Midsomer Murders* together. All those murders in the English countryside sure end up being mighty entertaining, I will say.”

“Yeah, I like a good mystery show too, although the police procedure is rubbish a lot of the time. I’m able to suspend my disbelief for a good story, but it’s a struggle for Liz.” We had many a debate on that subject.

Beau’s eyes sparkle. “See, we’ve found another thing in common. Now, satisfy my burning curiosity. Why is your cat called Poirot? Is it just appreciation for the character?”

That makes me chuckle. “Poirot’s a bit tubby and definitely a gourmet cat food connoisseur. He can be quite fussy about what I feed him, and makes it known when anything isn’t to his liking. He even has these whiskers that curl up and look like a mustache.” Needing to show him what I mean, I pull out my phone and bring up my photo album, which mainly contains pictures of Poirot.

“Oh my word, he *does* have a whisker mustache. That’s adorable.”

My inner cat-dad pride comes out. “He’s smart too. Like a lot of cats, he can also be rather aloof sometimes. But I like to think he could be a cat detective if he wanted to.”

Beau laughs an almost-giggle that I really want to hear again.

How can I make him do that more?

“That’s so sweet. I’d love to meet little Poirot someday. I’ll try to bring along an appropriate food offering.”

Dammit, is he asking to come back to mine tonight? I’m so out of practice. My cock’s already willing to invite him up, however.

I hastily ask, “How about you? Any pets?”

The knowing smile Beau gives me tells me he’s entirely aware of what I’m doing but letting me get away with it.

“I had a number of pets growing up, including a rooster named Henry. My last one was a golden-colored Persian named Dolly, after the great Miz Dolly Parton. My Dolly passed away about two years ago, after living to the ripe old age of eighteen and a half. I miss her something fierce, but I’ve held off on getting another new furry companion. I decided I wanted to see more of the world and do some traveling, and I didn’t want to leave Mama the burden of watching over my pets.” He gestures to himself. “And voilà, that’s partly how I’m here, sugar. Someday, I’d love to get another cat, maybe two even. A lot will depend on where the next couple of years take me.” He infuses that last bit with a wealth of meaning.

I squirm, my mind imagining all the implied possibilities.

Could I see someone like Beau being a permanent part of my life? Do I even have what it takes to be a romantic partner to someone else?

Fuck if I know.

I clear my throat. “Ahem. You told me about your podcast, but do you do anything else professionally, besides being a ghost whisperer?”

Beau’s lips twitch with amusement. “I was wondering when you might get around to asking me about that.” He sighs. “Because of my gift, I’ve often found it challenging to keep a job. Spirits can be quite distracting, and when they sense someone like me, who can see and communicate with them, they’re like a dog with a bone. They just won’t let me go until they tell me their life story or ask me to do some sort of favor for them. It can be exhausting. I try to honor their wishes when I can. After all, like Uncle Ben told Spider-Man, with great power comes great responsibility. I do feel like part of my purpose in this life is to help some of these poor souls let go and move on.” He shakes his head. “Anyway, I’ve had a number of different jobs over the years, but none of them have ever really stuck. Now I mainly run my podcast.”

He takes out his phone and pulls up the show on a podcast app to show me.

“It’s been gaining popularity in the last year, and I’ve got a decent-sized following of a couple hundred folks who regularly listen, but it doesn’t really make me much in the way of money. Anything I do earn goes back into the cost of making the show. It’s a labor of love, I suppose you could say.”

I frown. “How on earth do you make ends meet?”

“Well now, that’s a slightly more private question.” He licks his lips and lowers his voice. I can’t look away. “Do you want to get into my privates—I mean private business?”

And now I’m thinking about his bloody privates...

The way he’s looking at me, all bright-eyed and full of eager anticipation, is so ridiculous it startles a laugh out of me. “Haha! You really went there, eh?”

“Score one for me. I got a laugh out of you.” Beau grins. “Mission accomplished.”

I clear my throat and give him an apologetic look. “Sorry, I asked about your finances. That was rude of me.”

He waves a hand with a casual air of unconcern. “I don’t mind telling *you*.” His eyes go distant and his voice softens. “My daddy died when I was a child, young enough that I don’t really have any memories of him.”

My heart twinges. “I’m sorry. That must have been hard for you and your mum.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that. It wasn’t easy, but Daddy’s family came from money, and he left Mama a life insurance policy, so it was a struggle, but we did okay. Then it turned out that my grandparents had left me a trust. I’d never met them either, they died soon after Daddy did, but they left most of their fortune to me as his next of kin. Daddy was an only child, and I was their only grandson. It’s not the kind of money that aristocratic folks over here might have, but it’s enough for me and Mama to live comfortably for the rest of our lives. I’m careful with it, and thanks to Mama I have a good financial adviser who helps me invest and handles all that stuff.” He shrugs. “I have it easier than a lot of folks, but I like to think it’s the universe’s way of compensating me for having the ability to see and speak to the dead. While I do believe it’s a gift, it’s a double-edged one, as I’m sure you’ve realized from your own experiences.”

I wince in sympathy. “Yeah, people don’t understand. For me, it was maddening at first that I could see things no one else could, and nobody would believe me. Even Liz struggled to accept it.”

Beau gets a wistful look in his eyes. “It can alienate a lot of people, even those you thought you were really close to. That can end up leading you down a lonely path in this life.”

My heart squeezes in my chest. I can only imagine how much harder it would be to deal with this since I was a child, like Beau has. It’s only been

five years, and that's been maddening enough.

He tilts his head to the side. "Do your parents know? You don't have to answer, but you mentioned that they still live in Edin—um, Scotland. And if you told them, how have they handled it?"

That produces a genuine smile from me. "I'm a lucky bastard when it comes to my family. Mum was so grateful I didn't die that she's accepted anything that came along with that, including me being able to see ghosts. She's always been more receptive to that sort of thing anyway."

"How so?"

"She's a painter and has a rather open-minded artist's view of the world and what can or cannot be seen. There's more there than what's on the surface, according to her." I shake my head. "I swear she sees things I can't, and she brings them to life in her paintings."

"That's amazing. She sounds wonderful."

"Aye, that she is. Da took a lot longer to come round. I'm not sure how he felt about the whole supernatural thing beforehand, but he's never dismissed anything I've told him since the accident. Granted, he's a man of few words, my da."

Beau arches an eyebrow at me. "I see you take after him."

I flush a little at that and smirk. "Guilty as charged. I think what ultimately convinced him that I can see things he can't was when his longtime neighbor Ian passed away."

Beau leans forward, keen interest in his eyes. "What happened?"

"Well, I came home for the funeral, and Ian's daughter was beside herself with grief but also desperately trying to find her father's will and all the necessary paperwork she needed since she was the executor of his estate. I'd come over with my parents, offering my condolences, when Ian appeared in ghostly form. From the get-go, he followed me everywhere I went. It was unnerving and I was starting to lose my cool when I realized he was trying to lead me somewhere."

"A-ha!" Beau cries. "I had a feeling that's where you might be going."

"Well, he ended up directing me to a hidden crawl space in the floor under his bed, where he'd stored his will, financial paperwork, and a cool ten thousand pounds in cash. Emma was so grateful that she spent the next twenty minutes thanking me nonstop."

"I bet."

“Afterwards, Da asked me how I’d known where that was, and I told him the truth, and he believed me. No doubts, no questions. He just accepted it.”

And God, how that had mattered so much to me at the time.

“I’m glad to hear you have a supportive family,” Beau says softly. “It can make a world of difference. I’ve been so lucky to have Mama. She’s always accepted me exactly as I am. I suppose it also helps that there’s a history on her side of the family of folks who have The Gift, but I was the first one born in a generation, and from what I gather, my abilities are quite a bit stronger than some of my forebears.”

We’re interrupted when our food arrives, and we settle into eating while we continue to talk.

“So you mentioned that you got some kind of a pension when you took early retirement. Is that enough for you to live on, or is this new work you’re doing helping you pay your bills?”

I finish chewing the delicious bite of duck confit and wipe my mouth. “The pension’s enough to get by as long as I don’t go out and have extravagant meals like this one on a regular basis,” I offer with a wry smile. “I’ve thought about trying to start a new career, but I always end up coming up blank. I toyed with different options for the last few years, once I was well enough to go back to work of some kind, but there’s not much that interests me the way that detective work does. When I discovered ExorSquad and paranormal investigation as an alternative avenue to scratch that itch, and hopefully make more sense of my new ability, I jumped on it. Can’t say it’s made me any money thus far since Salon de Spin’s my first real case, but it’s gotten me out of my flat and given me less time to spend brooding on my situation.”

“Plus, it allowed us to meet. That’s a big win in my book.” Beau takes a delicate bite of his cassoulet and moans with pleasure.

It gives me *all* kinds of ideas.

Inviting him back to mine on the first date isn’t a bad idea, right? He’s made it clear he wants to get in my pants so maybe I should let him.

“I get the need to be doing investigative work. Even I can see how you come alive when you’re doing what you love. I hope this new path continues to pan out for you as a way to keep your mind and heart fulfilled.”

“I’ll be honest, I’m not sure this case would be going anywhere if you hadn’t come along to help me in my hour of need. With your assistance, we’ve found a lead that’s moving things forward.”

Even though I know Liz needs time to find things on her end, my impatient brain wants to get back to work on tracking down what happened with the fire that killed our ghosts.

“I’m so happy I could lend a hand. Those poor souls clearly need assistance in moving on after dying such tragic deaths.”

On that point, we definitely agree. Beau seems to have his own kind of justice when it comes to spirits, and that’s about helping them let go and move on to whatever comes next. I like his approach and find it sits right in my gut in a way ExorSquad’s approach never did.

Maybe we do have more in common than I realized.

By working with Beau and taking his approach to the matter, I’ve essentially gone rogue from ExorSquad. Once we wrap up this case, I’m going to have to tender my resignation.

“Besides,” Beau continues, “there have been some nice side benefits for me as well—like a free tour guide around the city who’s also my incredibly charming companion for this evening.”

Should I skip the next part of our date and say fuck it and invite him back to mine? He’s been giving me the green light since we first met.

No, that’s my dick talking.

At the very least, I want to make this a memorable evening whether or not it ends in sex. And I do have something special planned for him that I know Beau’s going to love.

We finish our food and the server comes back to see if we want any dessert, but we both decline. After we split the bill, at Beau’s request, we head outside and toward the walking path along the Thames.

The night air has gotten colder and a chill wind comes off the water, setting Beau shivering.

Instinctively, and without really thinking about it, I pull him into my side and wrap my arm around his shoulders. “Better?”

“Wonderful,” he purrs, pressing in closer. “I love a cuddler. And aren’t you nice and warm. I love it.”

My libido starts making a ruckus.

Fuck. Several hours ago, I told myself to be sensible. This date was going to be all about showing him a good time, then letting Beau down

gently, convincing him there really isn't anything between us.

Instead, I'm becoming persuaded that there *is* something there. Something I want to explore, even if it has my balls sweating.

"How long has it been, really, since you were last in a relationship?" Beau asks.

I run a hand through my hair. "God, this is embarrassing, but almost seven years? Jesus, yeah, seven," I admit. "How about you?"

"About four. I've gone on some dates here and there since then, but after my last big breakup, I decided not to hide any aspects of who I am anymore."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"I'm ashamed to say I'd gotten into the habit of withholding certain details about myself—namely my ghost whisperer abilities—from men I was romantically interested in. By that point, I'd had too many experiences with guys hightailing it in the other direction the second I mentioned anything about being a real-life Haley Joel Osment. I decided to try establishing a deeper emotional connection first and then gently easing them into the subject. But that, sadly, didn't work either."

We stop and take a moment to look out over the water.

"I'm sorry. That's bloody awful."

"Death is a topic a lot of folks don't want to touch with a ten-foot pole." He chuckles bitterly. "And if death's a part of your identity, even just a little bit, they skedaddle before you've even had a chance to explain yourself. I suspect coroners and morticians have similar difficulties with dating, but at least the dead don't speak to them. That's enough to terrify most people, if they even believe me." He looks at me with a starry-eyed gaze. "That's why I feel like it was destiny that we met. You're the first man I've ever known who also has this ability." He grins. "But that's not the only thing that drew me to you, big fella. I've told you this many times, but you're seriously sexy and *definitely* my type."

With that kind of praise, and him pressing his body into mine and making me tingle all over, I'm having trouble forming any kind of response.

This might also be why I haven't had a fucking relationship in so long.

"Seven years is a long time, especially for a man in his prime," Beau muses.

"Christ, I'm forty-three. Some days, I feel bloody ancient."

Especially when I have a flare-up and can barely walk.

“I’m twenty-nine, turning thirty next month,” Beau says. “So there’s thirteen years between us. That’s not too bad.” He winks at me. “I’ve always preferred older men.”

Good God, no wonder he’s got so much energy and vitality.

I’ve never dated anyone that much younger than me, which gives me pause.

But before I can comment on that, Beau asks, “How have you dealt with your... needs these past seven years?”

I snort. Now he’s trying to be demure?

I think that ship’s sailed, sweetheart.

My dick also decides it’d really like Beau to help meet its needs. Tonight, if possible.

Fuck.

I clear my throat and work on willing away my aspiring erection. “When I worked for the Met, I dated a little, had casual sex with the odd person here or there that I found attractive, people who didn’t mind that I wasn’t able to provide the kind of emotional commitment of a more serious relationship, let alone the time to devote to one. After the accident...” I pause to sort how I want to say the next bit. “Well, let’s just say that I was focusing primarily on my rehabilitation and coping with the emotional fallout of everything that happened those first two years. Being forced to retire, recovering from major physical injury, coming to terms with nearly dying, and then being able to see the dead. It was a lot.”

Beau makes a noise of commiseration. “Near-death experiences are extremely traumatic, so it’s understandable that it took you time to come to terms with all that.”

I give a bitter laugh. “Hell, I think I’m *still* working on coming to terms with it. I do admit, I’m in a better place now than I was then. Therapy helped, and once I wasn’t trapped in a hospital bed anymore, that improved my frame of mind greatly.”

“You mentioned you had a back injury and nerve damage?”

He looks up at me, no hint of guile in his open expression, just empathetic curiosity.

And for some reason, I find myself wanting to tell him what happened that night.

I haven’t wanted to do that with anyone. Even Liz hasn’t heard all the details from me, although I’m sure she’s read the case file.

But with Beau, it's different. Maybe because I know he'll *get* it in a way no one else has.

"Can I tell you?" I ask.

Beau's expression softens. "Come on, let's sit down for this."

He leads me over to a bench along the path and we sit close to one another.

"If you want to share your story with me, then I'd love to hear it, but only if you're comfortable. Please don't divulge anything that might be triggering for you." He takes hold of my hand and squeezes it in his.

And just like that, any last ounce of uncertainty I have about telling him my story vanishes.

"I'm not sure what it is about you," I admit, "but I feel like I could tell you all my deepest, darkest secrets, and you'd keep them safe and not judge me for any of them."

It sounds cheesy as hell to my own ears, but I can't deny the truth in my words.

"You smooth talker, you," he teases, but then turns serious. "But in all honesty, that's one of the sweetest things anyone's ever said to me. Thank you."

I inhale deeply, bracing myself, and let it out slowly.

"Five years ago, Liz was out on maternity leave. She was due any day, and I was paired up with a temporary replacement. We'd been working together for about two weeks when we were out in the field. A suspect we'd gone to question bolted out of his flat and took off on foot. I gave chase and didn't realize until it was too late that my partner wasn't beside me."

"Oh dear," Beau murmurs.

"It was a stupid assumption on my part. I was so used to Liz and me being in sync in the field that I didn't think before I acted. Even worse, I was a bloody eejit and didn't call it in. Amped up on adrenaline, I was, and too focused on catching the guy. Liz would have read me the riot act if she'd been with me. Anyway, things went south when the suspect disappeared into a dilapidated old building. I never should have followed him. The place was a wreck, clearly condemned, but I was operating on pure adrenaline and instinct by that point. No one runs that recklessly if they're innocent, at least not in my experience." Hearing the rasp in my voice, I clear my throat. "The suspect went up to the second floor, and

stupid adrenaline-fueled me followed. But then, just as I caught up with him, the floor gave way beneath our feet, and we both fell.”

Beau gasps.

“Two stories, straight to the ground. For better or worse, I ended up falling feet first. Landed the hardest on my leg and my back rather than my head.” I swallow thickly. “My suspect wasn’t so lucky. He went headfirst and died not long after impact. Severe head trauma. Some of the debris broke a bit of my fall, but the impact was so powerful that my heart stopped beating. I was told later it was a BCI, or blunt cardiac injury, from the force of hitting the ground.”

Beau starts stroking my back in comfort. It’s rather sweet, and I’m affected by it more than I would have expected.

Has it really been that long since someone’s touched me as if they fucking care?

“That must have been terrifying,” Beau whispers.

“Thankfully, I wasn’t conscious or aware once my heart stopped beating. From what I learned afterwards, my temporary partner arrived on scene shortly after my fall and performed CPR until the EMTs arrived. Instead of chasing after our suspect, he’d taken the time to call it in to get us backup, which is exactly what’s supposed to happen and is probably what saved my sorry ass in the end. Emergency personnel arrived relatively quickly, and after I was shocked back to life with a defibrillator, I became conscious again. Although only vaguely.” I swallow hard around the lump in my throat. “But I do vividly remember seeing the ghost of my suspect standing beside his dead body.”

Beau makes a pained noise. “Oh, darlin’, I’m so sorry. That must have been a whole new level of traumatizing for you.”

“You could say that again. Fortunately, I passed out pretty fast and don’t remember anything until I woke up again about eighteen hours later in hospital and after emergency surgery on my back and my leg.” I grimace. “And that was its own special kind of hell, and not just because of the physical pain I was in.”

Beau eyes me sympathetically. “Hospitals are not the best places for people like us.”

“Too bloody true. Ghosts everywhere. At least, it felt like that at first.”

“The type of death that happens in hospitals makes it quite common for the spirits to linger there a little while. Many times they’re confused about

what's happened to them. Most of them figure it out, of course, and move on. But at any given time, you're likely to run into several in a major hospital, still working through it."

"Yeah, well, it made being able to get any kind of rest damn near impossible for the first few days. They even put me under psychiatric watch when I started talking about seeing people who aren't there. They thought I was hallucinating and off my fucking rocker."

Beau covers his mouth with his hand. "Oh, Callum, I'm so sorry."

"I learned pretty quickly to keep my mouth shut. Anyway, my leg was broken in several places, so they had to do a second surgery while I was there and now I've got a lot of pins holding it together. While it gives me some trouble with stiffness and pain, especially when it rains, it's the nerve damage in my back that's harder to deal with. All things considered, I'm really fucking lucky I didn't die or end up paraplegic. But I still struggle with it all, especially when a flare-up takes me out of commission for days or weeks at a time."

He reaches a hand up and strokes my cheek. His touch is warm and comforting, and I almost want to nuzzle into it the way Poirot does when I pet him.

"I can't begin to imagine how hard all of that has been for you, but I want to tell you, I'm honored that you trusted me enough to share that with me."

To my surprise, he lets go of my face and wraps his arms around me in a tight hug. "I'm so grateful that you're alive and still here."

I hesitate for a moment but then wrap my arms around him. We sit for a long moment, holding one another and reveling in the fact that we're both here and alive when it came very close to going another direction for me.

"Aye, beautiful, I am too."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



I thought I'd get personal with y'all today. You see, I'm nearly thirty and I haven't seen much of the world still. My mama was a single parent when I was growing up, and we've always been like two peas in a pod. But she sacrificed a lot to raise a special child with abilities most can't understand, let alone accept. I went to college close to home, so I could live with her and commute. Partly, I wanted to be close at hand because she has a chronic autoimmune disease and she often needs help when her condition gets bad. At the same time, though, I suppose I was nervous about us being apart when we've relied so much on one another all my life. Besides, I didn't exactly have an active social or dating life at the time, so what was I gonna do all on my lonesome?

Then, after I graduated, she had a pretty bad flare-up when she entered perimenopause and it was just the excuse I needed to stick around and help her out. Things have been better the last few years, but I've been stuck in a stasis of my own making. As for Mama, well, don't you just know it? She's created her own life and circle of friends without needing my help. Heck, she's got a busier social calendar than I do. All this is to say, I'm starting to feel like it would be okay for me to do some traveling on my own. I'm not sure where I want to start though, so hit me up with your best recommendations in the comments!

—Beau's Boos and Beyond, Episode 61

BEAU

Oh my stars! Did Callum just call me beautiful?

I just might swoon on the spot. Thank goodness, we're wrapped so tightly around one another I don't have to worry about falling off this here bench.

It's the first endearment Callum's given me, and I cling to it like the romantic life raft I hope it is.

I don't know how long we hold one another, and quite frankly, I don't care. Right now, I believe I could stay here all night. The feel of Callum's strong arms around me, being pressed up against his deliciously hard chest—honey, I can't get enough of it.

And good golly, Miz Dolly, does he ever need some hugging!

The story he told me about his brush with death almost broke my heart, while the details of his fall in that derelict building nearly gave me palpitations. It probably *is* a genuine miracle that he's still alive.

But while it pains me to know he still suffers physically and lost the job he loved more than anything else, I'm selfishly relieved he's still here and breathing.

And with *me* tonight.

I wasn't lying when I told him that the way I see it, our meeting was destiny.

I've had The Gift from the day I was born, and granted, I haven't traveled extensively outside Alabama, but I've met enough people—and enough ghosts—to know that folks like me are pretty rare in this world. When you think about it, I suppose that makes a whole lot of sense. It's kind of against the natural order of things to be in contact with the living and the dead at the same time.

Mind you, I have met the occasional person with a fainter kind of sixth sense. They instinctively can tell when they're being watched and will get a little shiver when a ghost is close by, but they can't see or hear spirits the way I can.

I've certainly read plenty of accounts about folks like Callum who ended up gaining the second sight after a life-altering brush with death, but he's the first one I've ever met in person. We have a bond through our connection to the supernatural that few others experience. We also share a

mutual understanding of how this rather daunting ability makes us outsiders in a lot of ways.

Now, don't get me wrong, our supernatural connection is *not* the only reason I feel drawn to him. It's just one part of a much bigger equation. Callum Fraser is sexy as all get out, and one hundred percent my type. I've always favored gentlemen who are tall, dark, and handsome, with a bit of a rough, brooding edge. I don't know if it's the same part of me that loved Mama's reformed rake regency romances or what, but Callum just does it for me.

And while I'm a bit of an open book, sometimes maybe a little *too* open, he's like a tightly sealed treasure chest full of surprises—and I want to discover what all's inside. I want to know everything about him—and I haven't felt that way about someone in far longer than I care to remember.

Then there's the undeniable fact that when we touch, the energy between us is downright combustible. I want to experience it fully nude, with both of us pressing as much of our bodies against one another as we possibly can, and see where that takes us.

I'm ready to go along for that ride.

Callum gives me a squeeze, drawing my attention back to the present, and lets go. Reluctantly, I drop my arms as well, and we both stand.

"Thank you for sharing your story with me. I'm honored that you trust me."

He gives an awkward shrug. "You have a way of making me want to do things I ordinarily wouldn't."

"Why, sir, does that mean you think I'm special?" I tease.

I'm trying to lighten the tone after such a difficult conversation since I reckon he might be feeling emotionally wrung out right about now. Mama always says to treat folks gentle because you don't always know what they're carrying on their back.

I'm startled when Callum doesn't give me a grunt or a grumpy response to my flirty lighthearted comment. Instead, he studies me with that intensely focused gaze he gets when he's investigating stuff. It's downright potent when directed right at little old me like this and I start tingling all over.

For once, I'm struck plumb dumb.

After a long moment, Callum says, "Aye." He gives me a crooked smile that has my poor heart doing swoops in my chest, leaving me a little lightheaded.

“Thank you for planning this date. It’s been a magical evening,” I manage to tell him honestly.

“The night’s not over yet,” he replies provocatively.

Now *that* has my blood running hot and a certain part of me standing up and paying close attention.

My heart pounds but my flirtatious mode reactivates. “Oh, really? Do tell, sugar.”

And please let it involve going back to his place and having hot monkey sex.

He points ahead to where, above the skyline and overlooking the River Thames, a huge circular equivalent of a Ferris wheel spins.

“Have you been to the London Eye yet?” he asks.

I grin. “No, I can’t say that I have.”

“Well, funnily enough, I’ve never taken a ride on it either, even though I’ve lived here for damn near twenty years.” He shakes his head. “It’ll be a first for both of us.”

I like the sound of that. I grab hold of his arm and start pulling him in that direction. “What are we waiting for? Let’s get a move on.”

The closer we get, the more enormous the London Eye seems. The giant metal structure towers over us, and I have to tilt my head back to look up at it. I’m in awe. The capsules that carry people to the top are clearer up close and resemble glass pods with curved windows, no doubt designed so the people riding in them get the most spectacular views of the city below.

We wait in line as the massive wheel continues its slow but steady rotation overhead. Eventually, we make it to the boarding area, and when a free capsule arrives and we’re told it’s our turn, we hurry to get inside it. It turns out the Eye never comes to a full stop. It’s moving slowly, but you have to get on it a bit like an escalator.

I whip out my Polaroid camera and snap a perfect shot for my scrapbook. This is definitely worth remembering.

The pod is so much bigger than I originally thought. Once inside, it’s clear it could easily fit two dozen people. We could have a real fun party in here, that’s for sure.

I look around in surprise. “Do we have this one all to ourselves?”

Callum flushes and runs a nervous hand through his hair in a manner I find utterly charming. He clears his throat and crosses his arms over his muscular—*hubba, hubba*—chest.

“Ahem. Well, that is, I reserved it and, what they call... fuck...” He closes his eyes in resignation. “It’s called Cupid’s Capsule.”

My eyes go as wide as saucers, and my mouth drops open enough that if Mama were here, she’d be looking for the flies I was trying to catch. I don’t think I can take how adorable he’s being right now. He’s a totally sweet teddy bear underneath it all and I love it.

“So I’m guessing this one’s specifically for couples?”

He nods but doesn’t make eye contact, looking out over the city instead.

Callum Fraser doesn’t give himself enough credit. There is definitely the beating heart of a pure romantic buried inside him, and I’m touched that he’s showing that side of himself to little old me.

I sidle closer to him and pull him down to sit with me on a long bench in the capsule. Gazing out at the twinkling lights below, I lean into his side. “That was mighty romantic of you and much appreciated. Thank you.”

He grunts in that nonverbal way I’ve noticed he sometimes does when he’s a little uncomfortable.

I sigh happily. “I love this surprise.”

“Aye... well... erm... I thought you deserved something special for putting up with a grumpy bastard like me and for all the help you’ve been on this case.”

“It’s been my pleasure, darlin’.”

“Liz is right, you know. Even though it’s only been a wee while since we started investigating together, these last few days I’ve felt more alive and energized than I have since before the accident.”

Callum’s set the mood and clearly brought his A-game when it comes to a first date. Now it’s my turn to step up to the plate.

Go bold or go home, Beau.

With that mantra playing on repeat in my head, I get up and promptly straddle Callum’s legs. My knees rest by his hips and my ass settles on his thighs as I face him.

The shock-turned-desire written all over his face is so darn precious—and satisfying.

I have to take a mental photograph so I can revisit this moment in the future. While I’d *love* to take a Polaroid, I fear it would ruin the moment.

Because good golly, Miz Dolly, we’re having one right now.

I wrap my hands around the back of his neck and pull his face closer to mine. “Where I come from, you always graciously accept a gift and

promptly show your thanks.” I lick my lips. “Now, that would usually be a handwritten note or card, but I think this amazing gift you’ve given me warrants something equally spectacular as a thank-you.”

“What did you have in mind?” His voice comes out low and hoarse, sending a thrill racing through me, and the desire I see mirrored in his eyes matches my own.

Hallelujah!

“I think a solid start would be making out in here like a couple of teenagers,” I suggest. Then I move my face closer to his until our mouths are nearly touching. “What do you say to that?”

I can’t hold back a squeak of surprise when he wraps his arms around me in a vise-like grip and starts kissing the daylights out of me. He’s like a starving man and I’m the first proper meal he’s add in ages.

Our hot breath mingles as we each try to climb inside one another through our mouths.

Look, I’m no slouch in the making-out department, but Callum Fraser has me seeing enough sparkle to give Aunt Doreen a run for her money when she’s decked out in her rhinestone-covered Dolly Parton drag outfit. My dick perks right up. I moan as he begins to suck on the tip of my tongue and automatically respond by rocking my hips against him, yearning for more.

His hands travel up to my hair and rake through it with reckless abandon as he makes love to my mouth, and I try desperately to keep up with him. I’m smugly satisfied that my theory about how his focus and intensity while investigating may translate into his more intimate encounters was right on the money.

His hands leave my head and move down to cup my ass, yanking me in even closer. Our fabric-covered, achingly hard erections rub up against each other, and for a moment, I’m worried I might embarrass myself all too early.

With a gasp, I pull back, panting like a lizard on a hot rock.

“Lord, have mercy!” I manage to get out. “That was even better than I imagined.”

The need shining bright and clear in Callum’s eyes draws me in, and I want to give him everything.

When he moves to kiss me again, though, I gently place an index finger over his lips.

“Hold that thought, darlin’.” I glance out the window. “We’re coming to the end of our ride, and I’m not sure we want to give folks a free show, if you catch my drift.” I look into his eyes and flutter my lashes, lowering my voice. “Shall we continue this somewhere more... *private*?”

He cups his hands around my ass again—yes, *please*—and picks me up as he gets to his feet. Hurriedly, I wrap my legs around his hips so I don’t fall.

The door to our capsule opens and he strides out with me clinging to him like a second skin.

A shocked attendant gapes at us, startled out of their mundane routine.

Folks waiting in line either gawk or titter at us.

Callum doesn’t seem to care and neither do I.

“We’re going back to mine,” he growls.

Hot damn. Looks like we might be having some of that hot monkey sex I was hoping for after all.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



RULE #222: WHAT NOT TO BRING HOME FROM A HAUNTING

On occasion, you may be tempted to take home a souvenir from a haunted location. Resist the urge! Even if you have successfully extracted the spirit—or spirits—haunting the premises, steer clear of taking anything that isn't yours. Common temptations include, but are not limited to: money, jewelry, expensive antiques, paintings, and photographs.

There can be bad juju attached to such things, and without realizing it, you may be inviting something dangerous into your own home.

Some spirits have been known to attach themselves to objects. Research on this subject remains limited, but there is some evidence to suggest that a spirit may be relocated from the place of its demise if an object to which it has attached itself is removed from the premises.

You've been warned.

*—ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines
(Revised Edition)*

CALLUM

We grab a taxicab back to mine as fast as possible once we leave the London Eye.

I'm not messing about. Now that I've decided to give in to temptation, I'm not looking back. Part of my brain is still telling me that this is a bad idea, that Beau is going to be leaving all too soon, but my body is screaming that it wants this man with a burning desire that *must* be satisfied.

And I'm clearly not alone in that sentiment. Beau gives as good as he gets, and from the moment he took it upon himself to climb right into my lap and I felt his erection pressing against mine, I haven't been able to stop thinking about getting naked with him and what it'll be like without any clothes between us.

I don't know what our poor driver thinks of us, but we can't keep our hands off each other in the back seat. Kissing like horny teenagers, his hand snaking under my shirt and moving up to stroke my pecs, my hands drifting south to cup his sweet arse again. I squeeze and knead his firm cheeks.

When we finally arrive at my flat after what feels like an interminable lifetime, we stumble inside and I slam the door behind us, fumbling with the lock as Beau climbs me like a tree. I grunt and focus on keeping us both from toppling over. He's slimmer than I am but only a wee bit shorter, and it's been quite some time since I picked a man up like this.

It doesn't take long for my back to start protesting and my bum leg starts to shake, so I have to set him on his feet again.

He seems to recognize something's amiss.

"Hell's bells, I got carried away." His brow furrows with worry. "Is your back okay, darlin'?"

"For now." I wince. "Sorry. This busted old body of mine's not quite able to do what it once could."

To my relief, there's no pity in Beau's eyes.

"I rather like that body of yours, limitations or no, darlin'. You just let me know if there's something I'm doing that makes things worse. And you don't need to push yourself by doing anything foolish just to impress me. Trust me, all I want is you, just as you are."

And fucking hell if that isn't a punch to the solar plexus, knocking the breath right out of me.

Unable to verbally express how much those words mean to me, I try to communicate it with my body—claiming his mouth once more and tasting

him like a starving man.

Poirot gets one look at us mauling each other and scarpers, but we pay him no mind, intent entirely on one another and the insatiable need that keeps building between us. Everything else falls away.

I manage to make my way to my bedroom by pure memory, pulling Beau along with me, and then I tumble him onto the bed. My chest rises and falls in time with my rapid breathing, and I reach for the hem of my shirt, yanking it over my head and tossing it on the floor.

Beau leans back on his elbows and eyes me appreciatively. “Is it time for the peep show now?” He grins. “I’ve been waiting to see you in all your naked glory for quite some time. You’ve kept me waiting, sugar.”

“Christ, the mouth you—you’ve no idea what it does to me, do you?”

He leers. “Why don’t you show me?”

“Too bloody right. Get a move on and take your kit off,” I say with a growl.

He blinks at me in confusion but then seems to realize what I mean and nods eagerly, shimmying out of his pants, but gets stuck when he reaches his bow tie.

“Tarnation,” he mutters.

“Let me,” I say, my voice husky, as I step closer to carefully undo that silly bow tie like it’s a ribbon on a present I’m opening.

A big, beautiful, Beau-sized present, all for me.

Liberated at last thanks to my help, Beau quickly unbuttons his shirt and flings it to land on his pants.

He’s left clad only in his black boxer briefs, and I feel a bone-deep satisfaction when I see his erection poking a tent in them. I shuck my own trousers and climb onto the bed with him, moving fast to pin him underneath me.

He mewls like a kitten, clearly enjoying it, so I settle more of my weight on him and nudge his thighs open a bit wider. He happily complies. Then I nudge my erection against his and we both moan at the delicious friction we feel through our underwear.

I lean over to the bedside table, grateful I don’t have many folks over to my place so I can leave the pump bottle of lube right on top for easy access. It proves quite convenient now.

I pump a healthy amount into one hand and yank down our boxers enough to free our cocks and coat them.

“Are you okay with us doing this for now?”

He stares at me, eyes dazed with lust. “Are you talking about frotting, honey?”

I nod and he grins.

“I’ve got no problem with that.” He bites his bottom lip. “Neither of us has been with anybody in quite some time—do we need any protection for this?”

“I’m on PrEP,” I tell him, “and I haven’t been with anyone since my last full screening. I had one a month ago when I signed up with ExorSquad, and everything was clear then.”

Beau wriggles beneath me, lifting his hips to try to get more friction. “Same here, sugar. I haven’t been with anybody sexually for nine months, and I’ve had two tests since then, one right before I came over here. Everything was free and clear for me both times.” He licks his lip. “So I’d sure like to feel skin on skin for this if you’re game.”

“Fuck yeah, I am.” I settle my weight on top of him again, and he moans. “You like that, do you?”

“You bet your sweet Scottish ass I do,” he says.

“So cheeky,” I murmur.

“You know you like it,” he says with a smirk.

In answer, I thrust my hips forward, sliding my cock against his, and we both shudder with pleasure at the sensation. Rubbing against each other, we soon find a rhythm. Beau meets me every step of the way, lifting his hips to match my every forward motion. It isn’t awkward or fumbling. Instead, it’s as if our bodies intuitively know each other.

Beau lifts his arms up around the back of my neck and pulls my head down for a passionate kiss as we continue to frot. His mouth opens for me and my tongue delves inside, doing my talking for me.

Beau finally pulls back with a gasp and lets out a moan. His eyes are glazed over with pleasure.

“Darlin’, I’m real close,” he gets out between ragged breaths.

I grit my teeth. “Me too, beautiful.”

I rock into him, hard and firm, increasing my pace so our cocks slide against each other in desperate need.

Beau’s eyes widen, and he cries out as he comes.

I’m not far behind and damn near experience a mental whiteout from the force of my orgasm.

I collapse on top of him and he chuckles as he lazily strokes my sweaty back and traces little patterns there with his fingertips.

“I’m assuming that was just as amazingly out of this world for you as it was for me.”

“Bloody hell,” I mutter. “If it had been any better, I might have crossed over to the other side.” It was better than any I’ve had in far longer than I care to remember. More special too.

But I shy away from thinking too much about why.

He laughs at that. “Hey, let’s not have any talk of you shuffling off this mortal coil just yet. Although I flatter myself that I helped you see the light.”

I snort and gingerly roll off him and onto my back, taking a moment to do a quick assessment. Fortunately, I don’t feel the telltale tingle and accompanying numbness in my lower back that I tend to get at the start of a flare-up, so I don’t think I’ve done any damage while sexing up Beau.

“You didn’t strain anything, did you?” he asks.

“No. I’m fine.”

He snuggles into my side, making little contented noises that are cute as hell, although I probably won’t tell him that. He doesn’t need any more encouragement.

“We should definitely do that again soon,” he says, moving his hand to tug gently on the dark hair covering my chest, then following its trail down my abdomen.

My cock likes that idea and his touch but doesn’t have the staying power to go for another round—at least not quite yet.

“It was that good, eh?” I tease.

He waggles his eyebrows at me. “Honey, let’s just say you can butter my biscuit any old time you like.”

For some reason, I’m suddenly tempted to tease him back.

I feign exaggerated confusion. “What does that mean? Why would you put butter on a biscuit?” I shudder theatrically.

He blinks at me a couple of times, then narrows his eyes. “You’re pulling my leg, aren’t you?”

“Who me? Never,” I say with an affronted gasp.

That sends him into a fit of laughter and I can’t hold back a smile.

When he settles down again, he says, “Hats off, sir. You’re funnier than I thought.”

“I’m fucking hilarious,” I deadpan.

He waggles his eyebrows at me. “Once you try Mama’s biscuits, you’ll never go back.”

Feeling playful, I get up and point a finger at him. “You wait right here.”

I hurry to the kitchen, pull out a packet of digestives, and bring it back to the bedroom with me. I toss them down like a gauntlet.

“*These* are biscuits, and they’re for dunking in your tea.”

He picks up the packet and scrutinizes it.

“These aren’t biscuits; these are cookies.”

I cross my arms and arch an eyebrow. “They’re *biscuits*.”

He laughs and then blows me a kiss. “We’ll just have to agree to disagree, sugar.”

Then Beau gets a mischievous glint in his eyes and leans over the bed, managing to grab hold of his trousers and triumphantly fish his phone out of the pocket. He pulls up a picture of biscuits and gravy and shows it to me with a look of challenge.

“Best kind of biscuits, hands down.”

I study them. I’ve heard of them but never seen the real deal. They look a bit like a cross between a crumpet and a scone.

“They’re savory, I take it?”

“You can go either way with them. I’m partial to biscuits and gravy, but a warm biscuit with some butter and honey is also a real treat. They’re quite versatile and a staple of Southern cuisine.”

I arch an eyebrow and smirk. “Well, I’ll just have to take your word for that.”

He chuckles and I get back into bed, pulling him back into my arms. Admittedly, I’m liking the feel of him there a little too much considering this man is just here for vacation.

I shove away those negative thoughts and focus more on enjoying the moment. I know better than most how important it is to enjoy the here and now. You never know how long it’s gonna last.

Now that the randy humans have finished their exertions, Poirot comes slinking into the bedroom and jumps up on the end of the bed. Beau sits up, eyes alight with interest.

“And you must be the famous Monsieur Poirot.”

He slowly reaches out a hand, fingers curled in, to let Poirot sniff him.

“It’s truly a pleasure to meet you, sir,” he says softly.

Poirot takes his sweet time letting Beau’s offered hand hover there before he deigns to saunter closer and give him a little sniff. Evidently, Beau is acceptable because he shoves his face into the hand, demanding attention.

“Look at that fabulous whisker mustache! Your daddy was right about that.”

Beau scratches behind his ears and under his chin, and Poirot leans into it with a loud purr.

Watching my cat accept Beau into his domain has more effect on me than I could have anticipated.

I haven’t brought anyone back to my flat for a hookup since the accident. Sure, I’ve had friends and family who’ve come to visit, but even they didn’t stay overnight. It’s only a one-bedroom flat, and I like to keep my personal space private, but Beau being here doesn’t have me on edge the way I would have expected, especially now after the heat of our passion has passed. And I *want* him to stay the night.

Poirot is also rather fussy about the people that he’s willing to get near, but the fact that he accepted Beau so readily is a sign that Beau may just be right.

Perhaps there’s more to our meeting than mere coincidence.

Maybe, just maybe, it was destiny after all.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Thanks to everyone who commented on my last episode. Some of you are real globe-trotters and have seen so much of the world! I must admit, I'm a smidge jealous.

But I'm working on remedying that problem. After all your suggestions and some of my own independent research, I've decided my first international adventure will be in merry old England! What better place to do some serious ghost hunting? The United Kingdom is considered one of the most haunted countries in the world, and with its centuries of war, bloodshed, political intrigue, and public executions, it's bound to surprise me with the range of intriguing spirits I might meet. At least, that's what I'm hoping for!

Don't worry, I'll be taking plenty of notes for the show.

—Beau's Boos and Beyond, Episode 63

BEAU

An annoying ringing noise yanks me out of a very enjoyable postcoital slumber, and Callum groans as he gets up and fumbles around in his discarded pants for his phone.

He listens on the other end of the line for a moment, not offering a whole lot except the occasional grunt, then finally says, "Perfect. We'll

meet you there at 10 a.m.”

Bleary-eyed, I yawn and sit up in bed as he tosses the phone onto his nightstand. He and I are both gloriously naked, and I take my time eyeing him up and down, trying not to drool.

Good golly, Miz Dolly, he's one fine piece of man.

Callum tries to scowl at me but his lips twitch, and I can tell he's fighting back a laugh.

“Don't look at me like that. We don't have time for any funny business. We've got to get ready to meet Liz.”

I blink a couple of times. “Meet her where?”

“At the London Archives.”

That gets my attention.

“I take it she found something?”

His brow furrows. “Yes and no. There wasn't anyone prosecuted. From what she found, they declared the fire accidental and closed the case. But with six deaths, she's got questions too.”

It's my turn to frown right back. “Yeah, that does seem awfully strange. You don't get quite so many lingering spirits in the place where they died when the cause was an accident. That's not to say it never happens, but for them to linger that long—for *decades*—their unfinished business usually has more to do with how and why they died than what they failed to complete in their lives. We'll have to go back to Salon de Spin and see if we can interview any other spirits tonight.”

I swing my legs off the bed and get up, stretching like a cat. I can't hold back a smug smile of satisfaction when I notice Callum's eyes roving over every inch of me and lingering in all the right places.

“Like what you see, sugar?” I ask him, striking a pose with my hand on my hip.

He moves closer and yanks me into his arms with enough force that I squeak. Meanwhile, my cock gets all kinds of naughty ideas and starts to plump right up.

I stroke the firm muscles of his chest and try not to purr louder than Poirot. But it's mighty hard.

“You know I do,” he rumbles, leaning in to nuzzle my neck. His morning chin stubble gives me goose bumps all over. “You're pure bloody temptation, you are.”

I grin, unrepentant. “Right back at you, darlin'.”

Not one to waste a valuable opportunity, I squeeze one of his delicious biceps.

“Whew, I just knew I was gonna like what you were hiding underneath those clothes of yours. You, Mr. Former Detective Inspector of the London Met, have kept in shape since leaving the force.”

I note the embers of lust burning in his eyes, and I’m more than inclined to stoke it into a blazing fire.

But alas, he pulls away, twirls me around, and slaps me on my bare ass.

“Get that cute arse in the shower. We’re meeting Liz in an hour and it’s going to take us a wee bit to get to the Archive. We need to be cleaned up and on our way soon.”

I glance down and arch an eyebrow at his semi, then shake my head with mock sadness. “It’s a cryin’ shame we don’t have time for me to take care of that.”

His cheeks flush and a smirk crosses his lips. “Christ, you’re trouble,” he growls, and I chuckle as I saunter toward his bathroom with an exaggerated swish of my hips.

“Darlin’, I’m the kind of trouble a man like you prays he’ll find.”

I soon realize why he doesn’t join me, though.

His bathroom is itty-bitty, and I end up knocking my elbows a lot in the confined shower stall, but I get squeaky clean with only a few extra bruises by the end of it all. Afterward, I pull on my clothes from our date last night, which may not be the most ideal option for day wear, but beggars can’t be choosers, now can they?

I think tonight I’ll work on convincing Callum to come back to the B&B with me. We should take turns hosting one another at each other’s places, like any proper courtship in my book but also since I prepaid for my accommodations and adore Miz Edna. Now I have an additional incentive, namely the fact that my bathroom has a nice big tub we could both fit in.

Besides, I think Miz Edna would be tickled pink if I brought him back with me.

Although I suppose we still have the complication of Alistair haunting the place. I don’t know all of Callum’s preferences in the bedroom just yet, but I’d bet money he isn’t one for having others watch him being intimate with someone—especially if that person’s a ghost. The last thing I need is for Alistair to decide to show up at the worst possible moment. Sweet lord, I

just got him to give me a chance, I don't have any intentions of messing that up. A ghost is not going to cockblock me, pardon my French.

But I'll have to keep a careful watch on things, just to be safe.

In short order, Callum feeds Monsieur Poirot and we leave his flat, grabbing what the menu calls sausage rolls and coffee at a little kiosk outside the London Underground station. I have to admit, they're better than I was anticipating from the look of them, and I gobble mine down fast. After all, we had ourselves a passionate night of lovemaking and weren't able to even have a slice of toast this morning. I'm *famished*.

After our first round last night, we ended up making out for quite a while until we were ready for round two, which involved mutual blowjobs. After that, we ended up passing out with smiles on our faces. I don't remember what time it even was, but all those bedroom exertions have left me hungry as all get-out this morning.

I'm still sipping the last of my coffee while we stand outside the London Archives waiting on Liz. At ten, right on the dot, she comes striding toward us, dressed in crisp dress pants, a button-down shirt with a blazer jacket, and a trench coat.

Talk about iconic detective wear! She's giving Helen Mirren in *Prime Suspect* vibes.

The sky's dark and foreboding today, and my weather app indicates storms are brewing. Rain's nothing new to me, we get our fair share back home, but what I'm still really hoping for is a quintessential London experience, with a thick fog descending on the city so we can make our way through what they used to call a *pea souper*.

I always enjoyed that particular description.

Liz gives me a nod and a smile, her expression turning serious as she focuses on Callum. "I've arranged for us to have access to the fire investigation case files, and I've got a few hours I can spend helping you sort through it all."

A wave of relief washes over Callum's face. "Ta, Liz. This is a huge help." He frowns. "This isn't going to cause any problems for you, is it?"

She favors him with a wry smile. "I have plenty of leave due. Taking a half day isn't a problem."

I smile at her. "We're mighty thankful that you were able to look into this case so quickly, Miz Elizabeth."

"Beau, please, call me Liz."

“Sure thing, Miz... Liz.”

Her smile turns sheepish as she studies us. “I have to admit, the story you guys told me was an intriguing one, and I couldn’t stop myself from doing some preliminary legwork on it. I just wish I had uncovered more information.”

Callum reaches down and squeezes her shoulder, giving it a pat. “This is already plenty, Liz.”

I’m putting good energy out into the universe extra hard today in the hopes that we’ll find something helpful in the fire investigation files. For the sake of everyone, including our friends haunting the spin studio, I hope we can discover some answers, or at least clues that might lead us toward some.

Liz takes the lead, and we follow her into the archives where she has a conversation with one of the archivists, flashing her identification and completing some necessary paperwork. After that, we’re soon led to a special room with three cardboard file boxes set out on a table for us.

“Why don’t we each take a box?” Callum suggests.

“Where do we even start?” I ask.

“A task like this can be daunting to even seasoned Met officers. There’s bound to be a lot of unorganized papers that we’re going to have to weed through and try to make sense of. Why don’t you start with the lightest box since there’s probably less in there.”

We each take our respective boxes and get to work.

I soon learn just how tedious the paperwork generated by law enforcement investigations actually is. Callum had mentioned on the way here that an overwhelming percentage of time on the job was spent completing paperwork, and now I’m starting to believe he wasn’t exaggerating. It’s definitely not as fast-paced as Olivia Benson makes it look.

A short while later, Liz uncovers some old photographs of the warehouse after the fire was put out. Being a brick Victorian structure, it didn’t all come tumbling down, but the interior of the ground floor was gutted. The physical photographs lack the greater clarity of digitized ones today, but they clearly display the level of devastation the fire caused. Nothing obvious about the cause of the fire stands out when I scrutinize them more fully.

Callum returns to his box and after a while pulls out a dossier of witness statements taken by police. We start going through them and finally begin to learn some new and critical information.

“This statement is from Ken Armstrong, a bouncer who clocked out shortly after the club closed,” Callum murmurs. “He says that when he left, there were still some people inside the building who liked to stay behind after hours to unwind in”—he looks up at me—“the *private* basement.”

My eyes widen. “I had a feeling that basement wasn’t just written off,” I whisper.

Liz looks confused so Callum quickly brings her up to speed on what we discovered in the original blueprints for the building and the renovation plans.

“So the main floor was for commercial use,” Liz says slowly, “but they used the basement on the side for... other reasons?”

Callum cups his chin in thought. “We have reason to believe that, erm, at least one of the patrons trapped in the fire was gay.”

Liz’s eyes widen and she holds up a hand, wincing. “Do *not* tell me how you found that out.”

Callum and I stay quiet, and I mime zipping my lips.

She starts pacing back and forth in the room for a few minutes while Callum and I keep reading the witness statements.

Finally, Liz rounds on us, her gaze sharp. “So was this basement possibly some kind of underground gay hookup room?” she muses aloud.

“It’s certainly possible,” Callum replies. “Given the stigma still surrounding the LGBTQ+ community at the time, a lot of businesses that catered to that clientele were more covert about it.”

“Disco nightclub during business hours, private safe space for queer folks once the closed sign was turned on? Sounds like the club owner was either really progressive for the time, or he was happy to make money off anyone and everyone,” I offer.

Callum strokes his chin again. “We need to learn more about him. Keep an eye out for anyone listed as the owner of the building in the paperwork.”

“So, what are we thinking?” Liz asks. “Did the victims of the fire get trapped in the basement somehow?”

“Sure seems like a possibility,” I admit.

Callum returns to skimming through the witness statements. “Hmmm. Several of the witnesses confirmed the bouncer’s statement that people

often stayed after closing and used the basement, but it looks like this was more of a casual situation, not any kind of official after-hours business.”

“They might not have known for sure, especially if the owner had a secret arrangement going on,” I suggest.

“It’s also possible that those who knew kept purposefully vague about things. There may have been illegal activity going on, or the rumors of such activities, and they were concerned they could get in trouble if they spoke up,” Liz adds.

“The whole thing’s odd, but we definitely need to track down the owner of the establishment at the time,” Callum says. “We need to find out more about where the basement was located, and what its points of access were.” His mouth sets in a firm line. “There’s always the possibility this was a deliberate hate crime.”

That sobering point leaves us all with a lot to think about as we work.

For another hour, we continue combing through the many documents in our file boxes. At last, Liz finally tracks down the final report that closed the case.

“Well, we have a full name for the owner. Reginald ‘Reggie’ Grant.” She frowns. “It says here that the fire was blamed on faulty wiring. The chief investigator signed off on it.”

She hands the document to Callum, who scans it quickly, his brow furrowing. “That doesn’t make sense. Everything that we’ve seen so far indicates that the renovations were up to code for the era, and the level of work done certainly would have involved electrical work.”

Even stranger still, we can’t find anything corroborating the electrical fire explanation in any of the boxes.

“There’s something fishy about this,” Liz says, worrying her bottom lip.

Callum nods. “I don’t believe this is just a matter of poor recordkeeping. Everything points to a rushed investigation where evidence that contradicted the decided-upon narrative, if found, may have been swept under the rug.”

I dart my gaze between them. “Goodness gracious! Are we talking about some kind of internal corruption or dereliction of duty?”

“Sad to say, but at the time, because some of the victims were gay—or perceived to be, given the basement’s history—the officials weren’t too concerned about due diligence,” Callum says, his voice full of disgust.

Liz sighs. "I hate to admit it, but that's very possible. But there's also another angle to consider. We're talking about the '70s here. Unfortunately, it was a period fraught with systemic corruption in the London police force, which eventually led to some criminal racketeering investigations."

"And the Met worked hand in hand with the Fire Brigade, especially on cases that involved any casualties," Callum adds, a contemplative note in his voice.

"Exactly," Liz agrees. "We have a lot more checks and balances today, especially with the digital fingerprint we leave on everything we do. But back in the days of typewriters and paper, it was a lot easier for someone to potentially lose, conceal, or even fabricate evidence if they were so inclined."

"Especially if someone was greasing their palm," Callum grits out, his face a dark thundercloud.

"But was the Fire Brigade similarly questionable?" I ask.

Liz thinks about that for a moment. "Hmm. No, not that I'm aware of, but that's not to say there weren't issues. They just never became as high profile if there were."

"Well, slap my ass and call me Sally. I was not expecting this turn of events," I say with a whistle. "So if somebody covered things up, does that mean this arson incident may have been no accident?"

"It's looking more likely," Liz replies, her eyes troubled. "There are only so many reasons one would try to close a case on such flimsy evidence."

Callum is scribbling in his little notepad and taking pictures of some documents with his phone. "Some of these people could still be alive," he mentions.

Liz crosses her arms. "I already know what you're thinking. But you know very well that you can't just stroll up to these people and start interrogating them about something that happened decades ago."

Callum gives her what I'm guessing is his best attempt at an innocent look, but it's woefully inept.

Bless him. He tried, the silly man.

"There's no harm in chatting with them in an unofficial capacity," he says coaxingly.

Liz points a finger at him. "Do *not* do anything that's going to get you or me in hot water."

“What if we find something that warrants reopening the investigation?” he counters.

Watching them verbally spar back and forth is honestly quite entertaining. I pull a praline out of my pocket and munch on it while I watch, ready to offer them both one when they get done with their battle of wills.

Liz’s nostrils flare. “You’re walking a dangerous tightrope here, Cal. You’re not a DI anymore.”

Oh dear.

His wounded look at her words produces a sharp pain in my chest, and I move closer to clutch his arm and lend my support.

Liz winces, instantly contrite. “I’m not saying this to be cruel. But you can’t approach this the way you used to for the Met, and you can’t claim affiliation with us anymore. Hell, you don’t even have a private investigator’s license, do you?”

Callum shakes his head, obvious frustration written all over his face.

That’s when I have a brilliant idea. “What if we posed as researchers?”

Liz and Callum stare at me.

“Hear me out. One of my main reasons for choosing London for my first international visit was to do some research for my podcast. I produce episodes on all things tied to the supernatural, including famous ghost stories and such. Rather than that, we could fib a little and tell them that we’re conducting research for an LGBTQ+ history and travel podcast. The current season is focusing on old nightclubs and other establishments from the twentieth century that were bastions for the queer community. During our research on the Soho area of London, we stumbled across accounts of a place called the Midnight Vault that was popular with LGBTQ+ folks but was tragically destroyed in a fire. Few records remain so we’re trying to dig up more information from folks who were connected to the club.”

Callum immediately starts warming to my idea.

“That’s brilliant, Beau. A lot of this information we could have accessed through public archives, after all, especially given the age of the case. There’s a plausibility there that the average civilian would believe.”

Liz rubs a hand down her face in obvious resignation. “Fine. You can consult with anyone who’s still alive and willing to talk to you, but you *will* keep your conversations polite and accept any refusals the second they are voiced. Do not treat this like these people are suspects in an ongoing

investigation and you have the power of the Crown behind your interrogations.”

I give her my most winning smile. “Don’t you worry, Miz Liz, I’ll keep him in line,” I promise.

“Drop the Miz,” she tells me, her gaze never leaving Callum.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She starts tapping her foot, giving Callum an exasperated look.

He grunts and I pinch his side, making him jolt.

Liz crosses her arms and narrows her eyes. “Do you agree to these terms, former DI Fraser?”

Callum doesn’t look happy about it, but he finally nods in agreement. “You just had to use your Mum Voice, didn’t you.”

“With foolish men, always,” she retorts.

“I’ll keep him in line and we’ll share any new leads we find,” I promise her. “And like Callum says, who knows? We might uncover something that may warrant reopening this case after all.”

“Bloody hell. The higher-ups would just love that,” she grumbles.

It’s my turn to cross my arms right back. “Liz, six poor souls perished in that fire, and if they lost their lives in a manner that was not accidental, they deserve justice, I don’t care how many years it’s been.”

“I know, I know,” she says placatingly. “I wholeheartedly agree. I’m just trying to mentally prepare myself for the fight I’m going to have on my hands if that happens. See what you can find and get back to me pronto.”

We return everything to the boxes and leave everything as we found it, like we were instructed to do.

When we step outside, I pull out my trusty pocket watch. Nearly one o’clock.

“Would you like to join us for a late lunch?” I ask. “I know I worked up an appetite with all that research.”

Liz turns me down with a happy smile. “I’m having a lunch date with Doug since it’s my half day off.” She gives us both a knowing look. “Besides, from the *I got laid* glow both of you’ve been sporting today, I’d say enjoying lunch by yourselves would be more fun at this point, don’t you?” She gives us a wink and a little air kiss. “Toodahoo, boys,” and then struts off to meet her husband.

“I *really* like her,” I say, and Callum laughs.

I like the sound of his laughter an awful lot too. I get the impression the man needs to laugh more. And smile. Both look darn good on him.

“Liz is one of a kind and will definitely have our backs on this, no matter how much she was telling me not to go off. If we find something that justifies reopening this investigation, she won’t hesitate to bring it to her superiors.”

Hallelujah for that. Now we just need to have another chat with one or more of our friends haunting Salon de Spin to see what we can learn before we start tracking down people from nearly fifty years ago.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN



RULE #300: A SPIRIT CANNOT POSSESS SOMEONE WHO IS ALREADY POSSESSED

If there is a silver lining that comes with being possessed, it is this: You cannot be possessed by more than one entity at a time.

Unfortunately, there are some exceptions.

There have been a handful of recorded instances in which a more powerful entity has usurped control of a host, forcibly ejecting the lesser spirit and then possessing the person themselves. You want to avoid this at all costs. An entity strong enough to do this is unlikely to surrender its host without consequences to said host.

If you encounter someone to whom this has happened, make sure to use all of the exorcism tools at your disposal. What you are dealing with is no longer a routine possession. You have entered a Spiritual Critical Threat Level. If the exorcism fails, say your prayers and prepare for the worst. Your time among the living may be up.

*—ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines
(Revised Edition)*

CALLUM

“What the hell are you doing?”

Beau turns on a strobe light and pulls up a disco hits playlist on his phone, which starts playing through the spin studio’s music system.

“I’m just setting the mood for our friends. They might be more inclined to join us and want to communicate if we make the atmosphere inviting. Too bad I don’t have any disco-appropriate attire for the occasion,” he laments.

Then he points at himself with a huge smile. “But I did wear my best pink shirt and one of my favorite bow ties. I call it The Dolly in homage to an all-time great and one of my personal heroes.”

The bright pink bow tie is encrusted with rhinestones that sparkle in the light.

His suspenders also match the bow tie.

It’s definitely a sight to behold.

“My Aunt Doreen, she’s an amazing drag queen, made these for me,” he explains with obvious pride. “Aren’t they wonderful? I hope our ghostly friends can appreciate them.”

We’d gone back to his B&B after our time in the archives and had afternoon tea with the owner, the sweet elderly lady entertaining us with some of her guests over the years. After, Beau had insisted on changing his outfit in preparation for tonight. I can only wonder what his disco-themed attire might have looked like.

Earth, Wind, and Fire’s “Boogie Wonderland” starts playing, and Beau moves to the beat, doing what I’m guessing is his version of The Hustle. He’s actually a pretty good dancer, better than my clumsy arse, but the goofy grin on his face makes it hard to take him seriously right now.

I have to fight back a laugh. He’s fucking adorable.

Beau Montgomery might be the most unusual person I’ve ever met. He’s a man full of folksy charm and old-fashioned manners all wrapped up in rather eccentric clothing choices. We’re polar opposites in many ways, yet I find myself unable to look away from him, wanting to see what he’s going to do or say next. His level of interest in the supernatural makes more

sense now that I've gotten to know his abilities, but it's his optimistic outlook and kind-hearted approach that amazes me. If I'd been born with this ability, I'm sure I would have been bitter and resentful as fuck, just like I was when I first realized I had gained it. But he treats the situation like the gift his mother told him it is.

We work surprisingly well together as investigative partners, which I wasn't expecting. He's sharp and intuitive, and he often thinks of things that don't occur to me, partly due to his more expansive knowledge of spirits and their behavior patterns. But we have found a natural give-and-take that works and reminds me a lot of the dynamic Liz and I shared when we were DI partners.

With Beau, however, there's an added dimension. I want to be more than just work partners with him.

The more time I spend with him, the harder it gets for me to keep my hands off him—and to stop my heart from getting too attached. I may try to convince myself I don't care, but I wouldn't have planned that London Eye capsule experience for just anyone. Very few men have inspired romantic inclinations in me, but Beau somehow manages to make me want things I'm not used to. Like wanting to make him happy, to see him smile. To have him call me *darlin'* and *sugar*.

Endearments have never been my thing, and yet they feel right with Beau.

Even I'm not pigheaded enough not to recognize that I'm starting to develop feelings for the man I can't stop thinking about.

On one level, the idea of us having a serious long-distance relationship is ridiculous. Despite our mutual attraction, we still barely know each other. But in the short time I've spent with him, I've felt more alive and hopeful than I have in five years. Some of it's the investigation, sure, but a lot of it is simply being with Beau. The man exudes a captivating charm and a genuine kindness I know to be quite rare in this world. His attitude toward life and death have made me start to appreciate what I have, and focus on what I can still make happen, rather than fixating on the past and what I've lost. The latter was a painful kind of limbo I existed in for years, but since meeting him it's as if I'm finally breaking out of that in a big way. I won't lie, the fact that he also understands what happened to me and how I see the world differently now is huge. Now I finally have someone I can talk to

about these things and not have to censor myself because I fear his reaction. But it's more than that too.

At first, I wanted to tell myself that was the reason I was glomming onto him, because he felt like a fellow brother in arms who'd seen the same battles that I had. While I won't deny this whole supernatural business is a key point of connection between us, it's not all there is either.

As we discovered last night, our sexual chemistry is not surface level or just a blip on the radar. Scratching that itch once wasn't enough. Now I want more and more of him. But some scared part of me whispers that I need to shield myself from going any deeper with him, and I don't know if I should listen to it or throw caution to the wind.

As for Beau, he talks about us like we're some kind of destiny, and it's getting harder and harder for me to fight that sentiment. It's also becoming acutely painful to envision him gone and me alone once more.

Can I really give my heart to a man who appeared so suddenly and mysteriously in my life and who's probably going to be leaving from it just as abruptly?

Liz's words echo in my mind. Perhaps he'll want to keep things going even after he leaves. The distance between here and his home is daunting. It's a fucking *ocean*, for Christ's sake. That's nothing to write off. But I've already half convinced myself we might be able to make that work if we're both truly invested in this.

Am I being utterly delusional?

Fuck if I know. All I can feel certain about is that Beau's got me tangled up in knots and not sure which way's up or down anymore.

"Come dance with me, darlin'," Beau drawls. Oblivious to my inner turmoil, he takes hold of my hands and pulls me out onto the floor with him.

And fuck if him touching me doesn't feel all kinds of right.

"I'm a shit dancer," I admit, fumbling along with him and my two left feet.

He chuckles. "Just follow my lead, sugar."

The song switches to Abba's "Gimme, Gimme, Gimme," and Beau somehow gets me moving along with him. Not sure I'd call it dancing exactly, but his bright smile and glittering eyes focused on me make the whole thing worth it.

When the song ends, the lights suddenly flicker overhead.

“Aha,” Beau whispers triumphantly, then says in a loud voice, “Come out, come out, wherever you are! We know you’re here. We’re trying to find answers as to what happened in the nightclub when y’all died, and we need to ask you some questions.”

The speakers crackle and then go silent.

I startle and take an involuntary step back when I see six spirits now standing in the room with us.

They’re all throwbacks to the 1970s in terms of their hair and clothing, and they all appear to be quite young, from their late teens to at most their early thirties. Our spirit from last time, Jonathan, seems to be their leader.

Beau holds up his hands. “As you may have discerned, my handsome friend here is unfortunately unable to hear y’all, though he can see you just fine. So just be prepared that this trying to relay what y’all want to say is gonna get a tad complicated.” He moves to sit cross-legged on the floor in the center of the room.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

He smiles. “Mediumship is part of my gift.”

I blink. “What the hell is that?”

“Did you ever see *Ghost*, that movie with Patrick Swayze—RIP, sweet dancer—and Demi Moore?”

“Aye, but a very long time ago.”

“Well, Whoopi Goldberg is a psychic medium in it. She can let ghosts temporarily possess her to communicate with the living.” He tilts his head as if remembering the film. “While the specifics are not true to the actual work, her performance is outstanding, definitely deserving of that Oscar.”

I gape at him, then shake my head. “No. You’re not fucking well doing that.”

“Ah, sugar, are you worried about little ole me?” he asks playfully.

“I saw *The Exorcist* as a young lad, scared the fuckin’ piss out of me.”

Beau throws his head back and laughs. “Haha! This won’t be anything like that, don’t you worry. In this scenario, I’m the one who remains in control. I can eject an unruly spirit whenever I wish.”

“I don’t like this one bit.”

“I’ll be fine, darlin’.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Why’d you wait until now to tell me this was what you had planned?”

He sighs. “To be honest, I don’t use this ability very often. It’s physically exhausting, and I rarely have someone with me who can watch my back.” He smiles at me. “But I know I’m in good hands with you at my side. You’ll keep me safe now, won’t you?”

“Do you really need to do this?”

The idea of Beau in any kind of danger doesn’t sit right with me at all.

“No, but there are advantages if I do.”

“Such as?”

“You can more easily ask the spirits questions and get answers without me having to relay them to you. Also, I find a lot of spirits level up their communication ability when speaking through a host—in this case, me. Their answers can become more complete and understandable rather than just certain sentences on repeat.”

I notice our friends talking with Beau and wait.

Beau focuses back on me and gestures to our spirit lineup. “Here, we’ve got Jonathan, Archie, Tom, Peter, Devon, and Big Mike.”

“I’m not going to be able to talk you out of this, am I?” My shoulders slump in resignation.

He blows me an air kiss. “You catch on right quick, darlin’. That’s one of many things I like about you.”

“Fine,” I grumble, taking out my mobile. “Can I record the audio? That way I can focus on talking with each of them better rather than trying to remember everything they may say for later.”

“Sure thing, sugar. Just be aware that each one will sound different from me.”

“How so?”

“It won’t be my voice coming out, but theirs. Or as close to theirs as my vocal chords can mimic.”

That doesn’t sound the slightest bit creepy now, does it?

I steel myself. “All right. But if I think things are turning dangerous, can I... I don’t know, shake you out of it?”

Beau’s lips twitch like he’s fighting a laugh. “If it makes you feel better, then sure.”

I harrumph my displeasure but subside into silence.

Taking that for consent to start, Beau closes his eyes and settles himself into readiness.

“By all that is holy, like Miz Dolly Parton, I call you forth, Jonathan Turner. By earth and by bone, you who know truth may speak it through me.”

For a second nothing happens, then Beau’s posture slumps forward, his head hanging down. I’m about to move closer to check on him when he sits up straight and stretches his arms overhead. Then he looks down at himself in dismay.

“Christ, this bloke’s clothes are naff.”

Hearing another voice come out of Beau—and with a British accent, no less—is all kinds of strange.

“Am I speaking with Jonathan?” I ask uncertainly.

He grins widely at me. “That’s right, handsome.” He eyes me up and down. “Always had a thing for sexy Scotsmen.”

I clear my throat. “Let’s stick to business, all right? This is your chance to talk. Tell me what you remember about the night you died.”

“Oi, have a bit of tact, mate. We’re talking about me popping me clogs here.”

I grimace. “Sorry. What do you remember?”

“More things have come back to me since we last talked, and I feel less foggy when talking through your friend here.”

“Good. Start from your earliest recollection of that night, please.”

“Hmm. I got to the Midnight Vault around ten. Spent a few hours drinkin’ and dancin’, keeping a watchful eye out for anyone like me who might be looking for a good time.”

“Cruising, you mean?”

“That’s right. Had to be awfully careful. It looks like it’s changed so much since then...” His expression turns wistful.

“Did you pull?” I ask, trying to redirect him.

That makes him grin. “Too bloody right I did. Tall, strapping bloke like yourself. We snuck off to the toilets and he made me see stars.” He sighs. “At least I got laid one last time before I coked it.”

I clear my throat. “What about... after your rendezvous?”

“Stuck around ’til closing, didn’t I? I’d had a few too many by then and decided to sleep it off downstairs.”

“In the basement?”

“Right. Peter usually let some of us stay after closing. Continue the party in a more intimate location, as it were.” A leer breaks out on Beau’s

face and it's uncanny because it isn't quite him—I can sort of see Jonathan peeking through.

Uncomfortable and a bit creeped out, I shift on my feet. “So it was a place for gay guys to hook up?”

“Eh, sometimes. That night, not really. Peter'd got his hands on some grass and invited a few of us to join him for a smoke and cards.”

“Did you all know each other?”

“Yeah. Peter tended bar and Big Mike was one of the bouncers. Tom, and Devon were regulars at the club. They weren't bothered about me, Peter, and Archie being gay. That was a big deal in those days. They're good mates. Still are.”

I dart a glance over and see the others nodding along.

“So you were smoking and playing cards. What happened then?”

His expression clouds over. “We didn't notice the smoke until it was too late. A couple other folks who joined us, more sober than we were, managed to get up the stairs and out of the basement.”

My senses go on high alert. “There were others with you?”

“Yeah, but I can't remember who anymore... They must have made it out alive because their spirits didn't stick around like us.”

I make a mental note to go over the witness statements in more detail.

“What happened when you tried to escape?”

“By the time we realized we were in real danger, we made a dash for the stairs, but then there was a loud crash above us and the door—” His voice cracks. “—wouldn't open.”

“Was it locked?”

He frowns. “The knob turned, but it was like the door was stuck or blocked. We screamed and called for help but... I don't remember anything after that.”

“I'm sorry,” I say with as much empathy as I can convey.

Beau's body goes limp again, then he straightens and blinks a few times.

“Jonathan was becoming upset, so I let him go,” Beau says.

One by one, the other spirits take their turn sharing their recollections, none of which offers much more than Jonathan's. Until we get to Big Mike.

“A bit before closing, I stepped out back to have a quick fag. Saw Owen skulking about.”

“Owen who?”

“Owen Grant. Reggie’s nephew.”

A jolt of awareness rushes through me. “The owner of the club?”

“That’s right. Young lad, about fourteen or fifteen? Reggie took him in when he was about ten, I think, after his mum died. His dad had buggered off long ago, and no one knew where he was.”

“What was Owen doing?”

Big Mike frowns. “Not sure. I called out to him and he scampered off. I just remember because it was unusual to see him there so late. Reggie had some strict rules about when he needed to be home. The only time I ever saw him round the club was during the daytime, when he was helping Reggie and Peter with liquor deliveries and such.”

“Did you know the building well?” I ask. “Was there only one way in and out of the basement?”

“As far as I know. The basement was fully underground, no windows at all, and only that one door.”

“Thank you.”

A moment later, Jonathan’s back and seems to have regained his composure.

“I just wanted to add two things. First, Reggie was an arsehole. Don’t trust anything he might tell you.”

“Thanks for the heads-up, but we haven’t managed to locate him yet, and we aren’t sure if he’s still alive this many years later.”

Jonathan looks bewildered for a moment. “Time feels different since I died. I can’t measure it the same way.”

I don’t really know what to say to that. I can’t imagine what it must be like stuck in the weird limbo they’re in for over fifty years.

He shakes his head and focuses on me. “Second, for what it’s worth, take the damn chance.”

“What?”

“Life’s all too fleeting, mate. If I knew then what I know now, I would have lived every bloody day like it was my last. And I would have followed my heart even when I was too scared of getting hurt. Live each day so that you don’t have regrets when it’s all over.”

I swallow thickly. “Aye, I’ll keep that in mind. Ta.”

Beau finally returns to himself, a tired look on his face, and I help him get to his feet.

He rubs his bottom. "That floor is awfully uninviting. Let's bring a chair if we need to talk to them again."

I search his face, which is a bit pale. "Are you all right?"

He smiles. "Just tired. Some food and rest will set me right."

Beau turns his attention back to our ghostly companions. "Thank you, everyone. I promise, we're going to do our very best to try and get you the closure you need to move on. If we can help you find peace, we will. In the meantime, if you can remember anything else, we'll be back again soon."

All the spirits except for Jonathan flicker and disappear. Jonathan cocks one hip and puts his hand on it, gesturing toward me with the other as he talks.

"What's he saying?" I ask.

Beau laughs. "He wants to know if we've bumped uglies yet."

I choke on my saliva.

Beau's mouth curves up in a smirk. "He says it's plain as day that we fancy each other, so we shouldn't be... plonkers? Whatever that means."

With that, Jonathan gives us a little salute and flickers away.

"What do you say to coming over to my place?" Beau says with an air of invitation as we pack up our gear to leave.

"Would that be all right?"

"I don't think Miz Edna will have a problem with it. She basically gave you a green light at tea earlier, but..." He hesitates.

"What?"

"Nothing," he says, looking away guiltily.

I narrow my eyes. "*Please* don't tell me Alistair is still haunting the B&B."

"He hasn't been ready to move on quite yet," Beau admits.

I run a hand down my face and groan.

He bats his eyelashes at me. "Don't worry, it's only one little ghost, and he probably won't bother us."

I cross my arms over my chest. "There's no way I'm having sex with you if there's a ghost hanging about."

Beau gives me a determined look. "Then that's just more motivation to help poor Alistair move on. I was already planning on getting the job done, but you've given me an added incentive to speed things along. And I'm sure your assistance will be helpful." He gives me pleading, puppy dog eyes. "Stay with me tonight, pretty please with sugar on top."

Well, *damn*.
How the hell can I say no to this man?
“Fine,” I grumble, “but no sex.”
Beau’s eyes sparkle. “Deal!”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Good day to all my devoted listeners! Recently I've received some emails on the same topic so I thought I'd talk about it today to answer most of you. Some folks are wondering about whether or not it's worthwhile to attend a convention devoted to the paranormal and supernatural. That's a great question! The answer, though, probably varies from person to person.

One that I've wanted to attend but haven't had the chance to yet is New Orleans ParaCon. Now, it covers a wide range of topics related to the supernatural, but also stuff like cryptids, UFOs, and anything unexplained. I can't rightly say much about those latter topics. My gift doesn't give me insights into anything beyond the supernatural. But that convention sure does look like a whole load of fun. You get to attend panels and presentations and also go on some local ghost tours. In New Orleans, that's bound to be fascinatin'.

I can't vouch for all of their speakers, mind you, but I'm sure there's some worthwhile stuff covered. If you have the money and you're keen to interact with other enthusiasts in a convention setting, you'll probably find it worth your while.

For folks in the Alabama area, we have the Deep South Para-Comi-Con every year. It's kind of a mashup of a paranormal convention meets Dragon Con. There're cosplay events, vendors, and performers but also panels, workshops, and presentations.

Do you know of any other conventions you'd like to recommend? Be sure to send them my way and I'll share them in the show notes.

—*Beau's Boos and Beyond*, Episode 64

BEAU

The rain is coming down heavy by the time we make it back, and I stumble on the first step leading up to the entrance of the B&B. Callum, like a true gentleman, catches me before I fall.

"Thank you kindly, sir," I say with a weak smile.

He frowns, water dripping down the side of his face. "Steady on, Beau. Christ, you're dead on your feet."

That makes me laugh. "Are *you* starting to make jokes about death now?"

He growls in irritation. "Oh, haud yer wheesht, ya numpty."

When Callum gets annoyed or discombobulated, his Scottish burr gets a lot thicker than how he usually talks. How wonderfully adorable!

"I have no idea what you're saying right now, but it sure sounds sexy."

He narrows his eyes and swoops in to kiss me into stunned silence. Before I can react, he picks me up in a princess carry that makes my heart swoon.

But that's followed by worry.

"What about your back, darlin'?"

"My damn back's fine. I'm carrying you inside and I won't hear any complaints," he says in that stern way of his that makes me all warm and tingly inside.

"None from me, darling. You can carry me anywhere anytime you want. Just don't hurt yourself."

We're both soaking wet from the rain when we get into the entryway.

In our eagerness to interview our ghostly crew again, we forgot to bring umbrellas, and the rain that had been looming all day finally caught up with us on our way back to my place. My poor shirt and bow tie are drenched. I can only hope they dry well or I'll need to ask Doreen to make me a new bow tie.

Miz Edna pops her gray-haired head out of the living room, from where I hear the television going.

“Oh my word! You two look soaked all the way through. You must be chilled to the bone. Hurry upstairs and get in a hot shower, both of you.”

“You don’t mind if my, um, friend here stays the night with me?”

She titters. “Of course not. It’s going to be chilly tonight so you boys bundle up in bed and keep each other warm. After I finish watching my show, I’m off to bed myself.”

We say our goodnights and head upstairs, the staircase creaking under our weight. Once inside my room, we quickly shuck our wet clothes, hanging them where we can to dry, and Callum pulls me into the en suite bathroom.

Mine is quite a bit bigger than his, hallelujah, and we both fit into the shower-tub combo together. It’s real cozy, and we sigh in relief once the spray of hot water starts warming us up.

“London rain is no joke,” I say with a yawn. I shake my head, trying to keep my eyes open. “Sorry,” I mumble. “We’re both naked right now, and I should be jumping at the pleasurable opportunity that the situation presents, but I’m well and truly *knackered*, as you all like to say. Back home, we’d say I’m plumb tuckered out.”

He brushes back the wet hair on my forehead in an almost tender manner that has my heart all aflutter again. Callum Fraser might be gruff and grumpy on the outside, but there’s a warm, caring man underneath it all. And I’m really hoping he’s starting to care about little ole me, because I already care about him more than I maybe should. But I’m willing to brave the possibility of heartbreak for a chance at love and happiness. I know better than most how fleeting our time here is.

Callum pumps some shampoo into his hand and starts washing my hair for me.

I’m one hundred percent a fan of this kind of treatment.

“It’s clear that what you did tonight took a lot out of you. Orgasms can wait.”

“You’re mighty understanding,” I say.

He arches an eyebrow. “I’m forty-three. My priorities are different from when I was younger. Let’s call it maturity.”

I chuckle. “Duly noted.”

He turns me around and rinses out the shampoo, handing me the soap to scrub the rest of myself clean.

“We’re going to get a good night’s sleep so we can use our new investigative information tomorrow. I want to track down anyone still alive that we can.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

In no time at all, we’re squeaky clean and sufficiently warmed up. We towel off and return to the bedroom. I pull on my flannel pajama pants and a T-shirt, then crawl into the double bed with a sigh, burrowing under the duvet.

It’s been a long time since I last acted as a medium and I am feeling every ounce of exhaustion from it. Callum slides in beside me, still gloriously naked, and pulls me into his arms, making me sigh with contentment.

“You’re always so toasty warm. I love it,” I tell him.

“Aye, I’ve been told I run hot.”

“Ordinarily, I’d make a sexy joke about that, but I’m too darn tired.”

He strokes a hand through my damp hair. “Is it always like this for you after doing that medium stuff?”

I yawn and nod. “It takes a lot of mental and physical energy—for me anyway. I’ve heard it comes more naturally to some folks, but it seems to be a lesser talent as part of The Gift for me. It can come in awfully handy in certain situations, though.”

“Hmm. It did make interviewing all of them a lot easier,” Callum murmurs. “But it was more than a little unnerving to witness another entity use you to communicate.”

“It can be upsetting to some folks,” I admit, “but I figured you could handle it.”

He nuzzles the back of my neck, and I relish the sensation of his warm breath against my skin.

“I don’t want you to do that again unless you have to,” he says quietly.

I yawn again. “I’ll do my best, but I can’t promise anything. If an opportune moment arises in which being a vessel for one of our spirits proves beneficial to bringing them the peace they need to move on, then I’m probably going to do it.”

He tightens his grip on me. “I’m beginning to think you’re just as hardheaded as I am.”

Now that makes me chuckle. “Mama always says I’m stubborn as a mule. Maybe that’s why we get on so well. Look at us. Every day we keep finding more and more things we have in common. Are you starting to believe in our destiny yet?” I prod, a teasing note in my voice.

There’s a beat of silence and then he says, “I’m starting to think there might be something to that theory.”

His unexpected words send my heart racing, and another spark of hope lights up inside me.

Good golly, Miz Dolly, this man’s gonna make me twitterpated before too long.

“When did you realize you could be a medium?”

That jars me out of my rose-colored thoughts and I wince at the memory.

“When I was in middle school, but it’s not exactly a pleasant recollection.”

“You don’t need to tell me about it then,” he rushes to say.

I pat his arm wrapped around my middle. “A boy in my class died in a car accident, very sudden and tragic. His spirit stuck around because he needed to tell his parents something. He’d had a fight with them prior to the accident, and he wanted to apologize and tell them he loved them. Not an uncommon thing.” I sigh. “His spirit followed me around for days until I finally agreed to go to his family’s house. At that time, I didn’t have the level of understanding about mediumship and the parameters of control that I do now. So I told his parents that he had something he wanted to tell them, but I unconsciously opened myself up and he slipped right on in and took the wheel.”

“I take it that didn’t go the way you hoped.”

“No, sir, it did not. Freaked me and them out big time—for different reasons, of course. As you’ve learned, lots of folks can’t handle the idea of the supernatural being real. Those who are grieving the fresh loss of a loved one often handle it even less well. Jimmy’s parents didn’t want to believe their son was talking to them from beyond the Veil. Heck, they weren’t quite ready to accept that he was gone, but they were pretty religious and the whole situation was an affront to them and their beliefs.” I sigh in recollection. “After all was said and done, I was roundly kicked out of their house by his father and cursed at, while his poor mother just kept weeping for her boy. On the plus side, Jimmy told them what he needed to, and

despite their reactions, it gave him the peace he needed to move on.” I close my eyes. “But whenever I saw his folks around town after that, they steered clear of me. Eventually, they moved away, but the story got around town and didn’t do any favors to my reputation as the town weirdo.”

He squeezes me tight. “That must have been hard, but you were so bloody brave and kind to do that for him. A lot of people would have looked the other way and kept their nose out of it.”

My cheeks warm under his praise. “I wanted to help but ended up paying a price for it. That’s often the case when it comes to The Gift. I suppose it’s a check and balance in the universe, but it sure can make life awfully lonely.”

“Aye.”

“It’s hard to keep friends who don’t believe in your abilities, and it can sometimes scare away the ones who do. The reality of what we can see is too much for most folks. I don’t blame ’em. I suppose if I had been born just like them, I might look at someone like me and think he was a total crackpot. I’m sure you would have felt the same before your accident.”

He nuzzles my hair, and I have to think he might be a bit like his cat, Poirot.

I yawn again and Callum tucks the blankets in around us tighter.

“Enough yammering for tonight. You need to get some rest.”

I’m touched at his wanting to take care of me. No one besides Mama ever has. I cuddle the arm of his that’s wrapped around me like it’s my very own teddy bear.

“Thank you, Callum, I’m glad you’re here and looking out for me.”

“Aye, beautiful. Now go to sleep.”

I don’t need him to tell me twice.

It isn’t until the next morning that my senses register something, and I blink open my eyes to see Alistair hovering at the end of the bed.

Callum’s still fast asleep beside me, an arm draped over me. He’s a real cuddler when he sleeps. Yet another point in his favor. I can already imagine cold winter nights wrapped around each other.

Maybe even in Scotland?

“Have you decided to take me up on my offer?” I ask Alistair quietly.

He’s silent for a long moment. “I need to tell her a few things. Can you share that with her?”

“I can, but I can’t guarantee how she’ll react to it. Not everyone wants to hear that their loved one is still lingering and hasn’t moved on. Fewer still believe that’s even possible.”

For the first time, he smiles. “I know my mum. She’ll understand that it’s me.”

I hope he’s right. The last thing I need is to be kicked out of my B&B early, but I have to take the risk to help Alistair move on. I’ve genuinely come to care for Miz Edna, who’s a total sweetheart, and I know she would want her son to be able to move on and not stuck here watching over her.

“After breakfast, I’ll see if I can sit her down and have a heart-to-heart with her about my ability and your situation.”

He nods and then flickers away.

Callum stirs and I snuggle closer, tracing the sharp line of his jaw and the stubborn jut of his chin with my fingertips, enjoying the morning stubble there.

He opens his eyes. “What are you doing to me?”

Hoo boy, does he ever sound sexy when he wakes up.

“Just admiring your handsome face.”

He scoffs and then pulls me in for a kiss.

Ordinarily, I’m not real big on kissing first thing in the morning when neither of us have had a chance to brush our teeth yet, but somehow with Callum, I don’t mind.

There’s no two ways about it. I’m falling for him, hook, line, and sinker.

Mama loves to tell me the story of her and Daddy, and how they fell in love. It’s a beautiful story, but I didn’t fully understand all of what she was trying to convey to me with it until now—until Callum.

And while part of me is ecstatic and downright giddy about knowing where my heart’s galloping at full speed, I’m also worried. As he’s pointed out several times, I’m not here indefinitely. My return flight home is in a week, and my time here is disappearing all too fast.

But that’s a problem for future Beau to figure out.

Right now, my bigger priority is helping Callum solve this case and help our new ghostly friends move on.

We get up and get dressed. Callum had the foresight to hang his clothes over the radiator in my room last night, and they’re nice and dry. My poor dress shirt and bow tie are still damp where they hang in the bathroom and I move them to the radiator once Callum’s dressed. After brushing our teeth

and cleaning up in the bathroom, we head downstairs to join Miz Edna for breakfast.

She spends a good part of it grilling Callum about his life and offering us all kinds of relationship advice. It's clear she's keen on getting us happily married.

She and Mama would probably get on like long-lost sisters, albeit with a sizable age gap.

After we finish our meal, I brace myself for what's to come, hoping for the best but prepared for the worst.

"Miz Edna, I have something very important I'd like to talk to you about. Do you have some time to spare?"

She studies me with an obvious look of confusion. "Of course, dear. Why don't we move to the parlor?"

We follow her into a room with a floral-patterned formal couch and two matching armchairs. Callum and I take the couch while Edna sits in a chair.

I swallow hard, nerves getting to me now, and Callum wraps an arm around my waist and squeezes my thigh in encouragement.

"Remember how I told you part of the reason I came here was to do some research for a podcast?"

"That's right, dear. Like an old radio program."

"Well, I didn't tell you what my show's about. You see, it focuses on the supernatural."

She smiles. "No wonder you came to London, then. There sure are plenty of stories about ghosts and hauntings here. I'm sure you've found quite a few good ones already."

"My interest in the supernatural is not just a hobby or a passing fancy. It's quite personal, in fact. You see, I was born with what my mama calls The Gift."

"What's that, luv?"

"I can see and hear things ordinary folks can't. Namely, spirits that linger in this realm."

Her eyes widen. "You don't say. The mysteries of life never cease to amaze, do they?"

She's taking all of this in stride so far, so I hurry on.

"I've learned that it's a rare talent, one that very few people possess." I swallow hard. "I'm telling you all of this for a reason. The other day, you mentioned you had a son."

She stills. "My Alistair."

I nod. "And he passed away in this house, didn't he?"

Her bottom lip quivers. "He did."

I inhale and brace myself. "Well, he's still here, Miz Edna. His spirit hasn't been able to move on because he's too concerned about leaving you on your own."

She covers her mouth with a shaking hand. "Alistair's here, with us?"

I glance over her shoulder. "He's standing right beside you."

She twists in her seat to look behind her. "But I can't see him," she says, her voice quavering.

"I wish I could help you with that, but I can't. I can, however, tell you what he wants to say to you."

With trembling fingers, she pulls out a handkerchief from her pocket and dabs at her eyes. "What does he need to tell me?"

"He says, ever since his father died, he's always been there to look out for you in his stead. He's worried that you'll struggle all on your own."

"Silly boy," she whispers, wiping away tears.

"He loves you so much, and he's sorry you had to watch him endure a lingering and painful death. He never wanted that for you."

Tears stream down Miz Edna's cheeks and I find my own face damp as well.

Miz Edna sits up straight, a fire in her eyes. "There was no way I would ever leave my child in his hour of need, no matter how hard it was. And I'm so grateful we got to spend the time you had left together, Alistair." Her expression falters. "I'm so sorry you felt like you needed to stay and watch over me, but I want you to know I'm doing just fine. Running the B&B still brings me a lot of joy, and I get to meet all kinds of people from all over the world. I'm trying to live my life to the fullest, so I can honor your wishes and your father's."

I frown at something Alistair says.

"Um, he wants to know if you remember the wishing chair?"

She gasps. "Yes. Of course I do."

"He says, he'll see you again one day, but for now he's going to let it take him wherever it wants to."

Alistair smiles in a manner I've come to recognize all too well and turns to look at something none of us can see. "It's time to go now," he says. "I think I see Dad."

Then he's gone.

The abruptness of it is always hard, despite my happiness in knowing I've helped someone.

I tell Miz Edna what he said and she slowly gets to her feet. When I jump up to help her, she pulls me into a tight embrace.

"Bless you, dear. Thank you for helping my boy."

"I wish I could have done more."

She reaches up a wrinkled hand and pats my cheek. "I feel so much more at peace knowing he's okay and that I'll get to see him and his father again someday."

"I'm just honored that you took me seriously and believed me. Not many people do."

"I've met a con man or two in my time, and you didn't strike me as one. But I knew for sure when you mentioned the wishing chair."

I tilt my head. "What did that mean?"

She smiles. "It was an old children's book my grandmother read to me that I also read to Alistair when he was growing up. It's about two children who find a magical chair that takes them on fantasy adventures. Now it seems Alistair's going on his next great adventure."

I smile back. "He is."

Callum moves behind me and pulls me into his arms.

"Well done, beautiful," he whispers in my ear.

And I hold on to him. Grateful for this moment, for this man, and for this life.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



RULE #94: DO NOT WATCH HORROR MOVIES IN A HAUNTED BUILDING

You might be wondering why this rule exists. We wish we knew how to explain this without making you feel embarrassed for even asking.

There are many clear-to-us reasons not to watch horror movies in a haunted building. Firstly, you need to keep your wits about you. You're hunting ghosts for goodness' sake. The last thing we need is for you to get distracted as that increases your chances of dying.

Secondly, horror movies give ghosts bad ideas. This may sound ludicrous. We assure you, it is not. Please do not provide spirits with deadly inspiration.

Unless you're actively looking to die, we suggest you save horror movies for places that aren't haunted—and that are preferably well lit!

*—ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines
(Revised Edition)*

CALLUM

After our powerful experience with Edna, Beau and I head back to mine so I can do some sleuthing on my laptop to try and track down some of the people from the initial arson investigation.

The entire way there, Beau is more subdued than usual, and his eyes and nose are still red from crying earlier.

I must admit, even I was deeply moved by what happened. Since the accident, I've cursed my ability to see ghosts left, right, and center, but Beau has shown me another side to all of this. We have the ability to help confused and lonely spirits move on and, in some cases, to give their loved ones messages from beyond the grave.

I know Beau was incredibly nervous about telling Edna that her son's spirit was still lingering around the B&B, but I'm so glad she accepted him and everything he told her. My heart hurts when I think about him as a young lad trying to help his classmate but having the poor boy's parents react so badly.

I don't think I could have done what he did at that age. Honestly, I'm starting to think that Beau Montgomery might be one of the bravest and kindest men I've ever met. He takes being different in stride and makes the most of his ability to selflessly help others. Hell, he makes a grumpy bastard like me want to do better.

It's fair to say that I've been in a nasty funk since the accident. I retreated inward and pushed a lot of people away. For the first two years, I was just coping with my new reality and dealing with the difficult and painful rehabilitation process. But since then, I've struggled to find purpose and meaning in my life again.

When I discovered that ExorSquad advert, a new path opened right before my eyes. If this supernatural business I found myself thrust into was real, then I could turn my knowledge and experience toward investigating such phenomena. Not quite your typical criminal investigation, but better than nothing.

When I unlock the door to my flat, Poirot comes scurrying out, yowling at me for his breakfast.

"Aye, aye, aye. You've made yourself loud and clear," I tell him as I go to the kitchen and treat him to his favorite wet food. In his defense, I *am* a couple of hours past his usual mealtime, and he's making his displeasure known.

The savory wet food, however, appeases him. He chows down like I've been starving him for days. What a lovable wee furry brat.

"Sorry we kept you from your breakfast, Monsieur Poirot," Beau says, smiling at him.

"Make yourself comfortable," I tell him as I put on the kettle to make some tea.

Once that's started, I bring my laptop to the breakfast bar countertop. Beau sits beside me on a stool as I start scouring the internet for signs of the people from the list. Nearly fifty years later, this proves to be a rather daunting task.

We hunt through social media profiles, LinkedIn accounts, and news articles drawing up a long list of potential matches in the appropriate age ranges, and then Google-stalking them to narrow down the results. It's time-consuming and tedious, but we keep at it.

We take a break at lunchtime, and I order us some pizza.

Once our bellies are full, we hit the internet search with renewed energy. At around four o'clock, we manage to narrow down to a likely candidate for Ken Armstrong, the bouncer in the interviews who'd clocked out before the fire began.

Seventy or so now, the Ken Armstrong we found keeps an active social media account where he posts videos and pictures giving people tips for how to stay fit by weightlifting in their senior years.

"You think that's him?" Beau asks.

"I'm not entirely sure, but it's worth reaching out on Instagram. A lot of details line up for this guy."

Beau helps me craft our podcast research cover story. Once we're satisfied with the message, I hit Send and lean back in my chair with a groan of pain.

"Are you all right, darlin'?" Beau asks, his brow furrowing with concern.

I gingerly get to my feet and stand, then stretch with slow, deliberate movements.

"I've been sitting too long on that barstool, so my back muscles are acting up."

"Is it your injury?" Beau asks, wide-eyed and worried.

"Hard to say just yet, but I'm not having any of the tingling or numbness that's par for the course when my nerve damage starts acting up."

For now, it feels mainly like stiff, tight muscles. Maybe I'll grab a quick hot shower to loosen them up."

Beau's eyes sparkle. "I have a wonderful idea. Why don't I give you a real nice massage?"

That surprises me. "Really?"

"Of course, darlin'. I'm not a professional, but I took some lessons from a physical therapist who was helping Mama when she was recovering after a bad flare-up from her lupus."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know she was ill."

"It's a chronic condition but these days it's mostly under control. That said, flare-ups can still happen."

I grimace. "Yeah, I know what that's like."

"Anyhow, after learning some pointers from the physical therapist, I would regularly give Mama massages when she was in remission because it can help with some of the pain. If you've got any body oil or lotion that I can use, I'd love to take a crack at massaging your back." He singsongs that last part with a wink.

I hesitate. Although we've been naked in front of each other, Beau hasn't spent a lot of time looking at my scars from the accident and ensuing surgery.

Feeling a bit self-conscious, I say, "I have some major scarring on my back and my leg. Are you sure that won't put you off?"

"Not in the slightest, honey. Those are signs that even though your body has been through something traumatic, it's healed and kept you going."

I swallow hard and nod, deciding to trust him. "All right, we can give it a go."

"If you don't like what I'm doing, you be sure to tell me. The last thing I want to do is hurt you or make you feel uncomfortable."

Somehow, that helps me shake off my self-consciousness.

Once we get to my bedroom, I pull my shirt over my head and set it aside before I gingerly lie face down on the mattress. I point Beau to the bottle of lotion, and he grabs it with far too much eagerness.

I grunt a little when he straddles my hips and sits down on my arse.

"Is this all right," he asks, "or am I hurting you?"

"It's fine for now."

"Good. You tell me if anything changes, honey."

I shiver when his warm, lotion-slick hands begin to caress my shoulders and back. His touch is gentle but firm, and he takes his time warming me up then going deeper and kneading the muscles to work out some of the knots.

It feels heavenly. My man has talented hands.

I still.

Fuck me. I just thought of him as my partner.

My heart squeezes inside my chest. I can't deny I'm developing feelings for my charming Yank ghost whisperer.

Deciding not to delve deeper into the implications of that newfound knowledge, I focus instead on the pleasure I'm experiencing. Beau's touch isn't sexual, but it feels nearly as good. As he makes his way downward and ever closer to the scars near my spine, I tense up a wee bit.

When he gently touches me there, I actually start to relax. He's not treating that area any differently than the rest of my body and not showing any signs of revulsion.

"You're a ball of knots back here," he murmurs. "Please tell me you get regular massages to help with this issue."

My ensuing silence says what I do not.

Beau lightly slaps my ass cheek.

"Hey," I cry out.

"Callum Fraser," he scolds. "After the kind of injury that you had, why the heck haven't you been getting regular massages? They're so important, especially when dealing with back and shoulder tension."

I'm reluctant to admit that it seemed like an unnecessary expense, but I'm starting to rethink that because if an actual massage therapist is even more talented than Beau, I've clearly been missing out.

"You're gonna make a promise to me that you'll rectify this situation," he demands.

Still face down, I grunt in agreement.

His hands resume their work and touch me like I'm something special and precious. I fall into a lull, soothed by the massage and relaxing more and more with each minute. I've nearly fallen asleep and am limp as a noodle when I feel him stop and climb off me. He moves to sit on the edge of the bed, stroking my hair when I turn my head to face him.

"I hope that helped, darlin'."

"It was bloody wonderful," I say. "Thank you. I feel so much better."

“Relax like this for a little bit longer, and then I think following up with a hot shower and some ibuprofen will have you feeling like a brand-new man.”

My phone pings, and Beau hurries to grab it and hand it over. I lift myself up enough to read the screen, and my pulse races when I see it’s a reply from Ken Armstrong.

“Bingo!” I cry when I open the message.

Thanks for reaching out. Your historical research sounds interesting. I don’t know how much I can really tell you that you haven’t already learned, but I can share a few things about the heyday of the Midnight Vault. If you’d like to meet me for coffee at the shop across from Golden Age Gym on Oxford Street near the Oxford Circus station tomorrow morning at nine, I’m happy to chat for an hour.

I hurriedly type out a response indicating we would love to meet him then.

That gets me a thumbs-up reaction and he copies a map address for the cafe.

I grin at Beau. “Looks like we’ve got our first interview lined up.”

“Oh, goody,” he says. “I have so many questions I want to ask.”

So do I.

He waggles a finger at me. “Let me take the lead. Your aura practically radiates DI Fraser of the London Met still.”

“Fine,” I grumble.

But I plan to get to the bottom of this case no matter what—and I’m hoping Ken Armstrong can help with that.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Welcome back to Beau's Boos and Beyond! Just a quick personal update—I've bought my plane ticket and the countdown is on. London, here I come!

Now, on to today's topic: whether to share your interest in the supernatural with normies. This is a delicate issue, and I speak from personal experience. For folks who aren't already invested in the study of all things otherworldly, there's often an inherent bias or disbelief barrier. This proves particularly challenging when dating. How soon is too soon to bring it up? At what point might they be able to give me the benefit of the doubt? What if, no matter what I do, simply telling them about my beliefs sends them packing? These are questions many of us have had to ask ourselves, and more times than not, disclosing our interest in the supernatural can make friends, family, and lovers distance themselves from us in painful ways.

I don't have any sure-fire methods for improving your outcome. But if you have suggestions, please don't hesitate to write in and I'll share the best ones on an upcoming episode.

—Beau's Boos and Beyond, Episode 66

BEAU

“What do you say to you and me trying to squeeze into that shower of yours together? I’m game to try if you are.”

Callum looks at me with hooded eyes, the facial lines of tension from earlier now gone. He looks more relaxed than I think I’ve ever seen him and I’m pleased as punch that I made that happen with my magic hands.

Now I want to be his personal massage therapist from here on out.

“I can barely fit in there by myself,” he says. “I don’t think we’re both gonna be able to make it happen. The last thing we need is to get stuck and have to call the 999.”

“Well, shoot.” I’m the one grumbling for a change.

Callum snorts out a laugh, and I’m working on preparing my next verbal onslaught of persuasion when a familiar ringtone plays from my pocket. I pull out my phone and cast an apologetic look in Callum’s direction.

“Sorry, I need to take this.”

“Go right ahead. I’m still basking in the post-massage afterglow,” he murmurs with a smile.

I grin at him and swipe the answer button.

“Hi, Mama. How are you this fine day?”

“Beauregard Jeremiah Montgomery,” she chastises in a slightly shrill voice. “You had me worried sick. I haven’t been able to get a hold of you in far too long.”

I rub my forehead. “Mama, I texted you that I was gonna be busy and that I’d get back to you soon.”

She harrumphs. “Well, it’s been long enough to have me imagining the worst. I wasn’t gonna wait around for the London police to be calling me and telling me you were in jail.” Her voice cracks. “Or worse.”

I sigh. I love my mama, but she does have a flair for the dramatic.

“I’ve been busy,” I tell her. And no, I do *not* sound petulant.

Well, maybe a little.

“Busy? You’re supposed to be on vacation. Why are you *busy*? Vacation is supposed to be about relaxing.”

I swallow. “Um... well...” I dart a glance at Callum, who’s studying me with keen interest, his eyes more focused than they were a moment ago.

“I’ve been helping out with a little supernatural investigation,” I reply.

There’s a loaded moment of silence until Mama says, “And *who*, pray tell, are you helping with this investigation?”

I realize now that I've walked right into her perfectly laid trap.

"A friend," I say vaguely.

"Beau, honey, you have not been in London long enough to have made a friend, let alone one who's receptive to your Gift. I know my child and I call bull crap!"

I groan. "Fine. His name is Callum, and he has a little bit of The Gift as well."

She gasps dramatically. "Oh my good lord! Bless my stars. This must be destiny."

She says that loud enough that Callum can hear it and he starts laughing his fool head off.

"That's what I told him," I grumble.

"Is that him I hear in the background?" she asks sharply.

Dagnabbit. Mama's got ears like a fox.

I hesitate and then say, "Yes."

"Put me on speakerphone," she demands.

Not one to ignore Mama's commands, I comply. "You're on speaker now, Mama."

"Well, hello there, sir. My son tells me you two are real friendly-like and are investigating some kind of supernatural case together. I'm Beau's mama, Sarah Jane Montgomery, but you can call me Sarah Jane, and I'd like to know more about who you are, if you please."

Callum sits up wide-eyed. "Um, hello, Sarah Jane. My name's Callum Fraser."

"A pleasure to meet you, honey. Now, how did you and my Beau meet?"

"It's a bit of a story. You see, I used to be a detective inspector for the Met. That's the Metropolitan Police here in London. But a few years ago, I had a near-death accident on the job, and ever since, I've been able to see ghosts."

Mama gasps. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Thanks. Despite what happened, I'm grateful to be alive. Adapting to ghosts in the world hasn't been easy, but Beau's helped a lot with that in a short span of time. When we met a few days ago, I was starting my very first paranormal investigation but didn't have a clue what I was doing. Coincidence or fate brought your son into my life, and now we're working together to try to solve this case."

Mama sighs dreamily. “Oh my word! Isn’t that just the sweetest story. Imagine you two finding one another in this big ole world the way that you did. Why, that seems like some kind of divine intervention, if you ask me. Could be your daddy looking out for you from the Beyond, Beau?”

I face-palm.

She titters. “And can I just say, Callum, you have the most wonderful Scottish accent.”

“Erm, thank you?”

Mama continues, rambling the way she sometimes does. “I sure do enjoy that *Outlander* show. Well, I don’t care for all the violence, so I fast-forward through those bits, but that actor Sam Heughan, he is absolutely wonderful, and that accent. Oh, my stars! Maybe Scottish appreciation runs in the family? My mother used to be quite partial to Sir Sean Connery back in the day.”

Callum’s lips twitch in obvious amusement, but he keeps his tone serious. “Aye, a true Scottish legend, that one.”

He leans close and whispers in my ear, “But by all accounts, he was also a bit of a bastard.”

I have to cover my mouth to hold back the laugh I nearly let out.

“What’s a Scotsman like yourself doing in London?” Mama asks, sounding almost scandalized.

And I can’t help but feel a tug in my chest, missing her something fierce all of a sudden.

“I’m afraid it was a necessity of the job.” He looks at me. “But I don’t know how much longer I intend to stay here. Ever since meeting Beau, I’ve been more seriously considering moving back to Edinburgh to be near my family. He’s inspired me to take charge of my life after I’d been stuck in a rut for far too long.”

My eyes widen as I study him. This is the first I’m hearing about his plan.

Dare I hope he might want to invite me along as well?

“Ooh, Edinburgh! And what family do you have there?”

“Mama,” I scold. “That’s awfully personal.”

“Hush now. Callum and I are getting to know one another. It’s only polite to inquire after one’s family.”

I mouth, *I’m sorry* at Callum.

His mouth twitches in amusement.

“Both my parents live in a suburb outside the city. They’re recently retired and enjoying their senior years. I’m their only child and I don’t see them nearly as much as I should.”

“Hon, I’m sure they’d *love* for you to live closer,” Mama says.

“Aye, that they would.”

“And they’re okay with your... newfound ability?”

“They are. Granted, they don’t fully understand it, but they believe and support me.”

“They must be wonderful people. So many folks find it hard to accept The Gift. It runs in my family so we all knew of it, but Beau was the first person born in a couple generations to have it, so I had to learn a lot along the way too.”

Callum’s voice softens. “I know Beau appreciates your unwavering support. He sings your praises every day.”

“Well, now. I got a little misty hearing that, thank you, honey. Beau and I have only had each other for a long time, so we’re a lot closer than some folks.” Mama clears her throat and changes the subject. “But no more of that or I’ll start blubbing. Ahem. I’ve always wanted to visit Scotland. It sure seems like a magical place. I read a lot of Highlander romances back in the day, with men wearing kilts and brandishing swords of more than one variety, if you catch my drift,” she adds with a salacious chuckle.

“*Mama*,” I lament. “Let’s leave the smut talk for another day, please.”

“Oh, hush now,” she says. “We’re all adults here. Speaking of which, have you two gotten together yet? In the biblical sense, I mean.”

I face-palm. “Mama! Time and place, please.”

She huffs. “Well, who knows if I’m gonna get another opportunity to talk to Callum? I’m only learning about him right now.” The hint of maternal accusation in her voice is hard to miss.

I may love her to pieces, but I can’t help but sigh and second-guess telling her about Callum. After all, things between us are still... new and fragile.

Callum, thankfully, doesn’t seem offended and chuckles softly. “It’s been a real pleasure to meet you, Sarah Jane. And I’m sorry for taking up so much of your son’s time lately.”

“Oh, don’t you worry your little head over that,” she says, her tone more than a little overeager. “You can spend as *much* time with him as you like.”

Callum arches an eyebrow at me, and I feel my cheeks warm.

“Mama, I don’t need you to play matchmaker for me.”

“Well, I disagree, son of mine. You see, Callum, my Beau is a handsome, well-mannered young man brought up to be a proper Southern gentleman by yours truly. And I’m proud of the man he’s become. But in the romance department, he’s had downright dismal luck. It’s the double-edged sword of having The Gift,” she adds confidently. “Finding a partner who can love and accept it is never easy. I find it rather ironic that many of the folks who won’t believe in the supernatural simply because they can’t see it are perfectly willing to believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost without being able to see them.”

“Very true, Sarah Jane. I’ve found it quite challenging to meet people who are even remotely receptive ever since I was able to see things the average person can’t. Beau’s the first who gets what I’ve been dealing with, and he’s been incredibly helpful, both to understand my own abilities and to also let me know that I’m not alone in this. You raised an incredible son.”

My heart goes pitter-patter in my chest, and I can’t take my eyes away from the man who is making me think all kinds of wild thoughts about how to keep this relationship we haven’t even fully defined going across the Atlantic Ocean and a couple of time zone just so we can be together.

My one real worry is that I may be a whole heck of a lot closer to making that kind of commitment than Callum is quite yet—and my days here are disappearing fast. Nothing like a ticking clock to layer on the pressure.

“Mama,” I say, my voice as chipper as can be. “It’s been so nice to hear from you, and I’m glad you’re doing well. Hopefully, you feel better knowing that I too am perfectly safe and healthy.”

“I do, but that doesn’t change the fact that I want you to check in at least once a day.”

Well played, Mama. You caught me before I could make my move and suggest touching base every other day at least.

I heave a sigh of resignation. “I promise, Mama. Now me and Callum need to get back to what we’re working on, so I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Next time we talk, I’d like to use that video call thingy. I want to see what your new *friend*”—she places suggestive emphasis on that word—“looks like.”

I give Callum an apologetic look. “I’ll see what I can do, Mama.”

“All right, sweet pea. You take care of yourself, and I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Bye now.”

“Love you, Mama. G’bye.”

I hang up and fall backward onto the bed in embarrassment, covering my face.

“I’m so sorry about that. Mama can be a bit of a meddler. But she genuinely cares.”

He pulls me into his arms, and I don’t fight it.

“She seems lovely. I enjoyed talking with her.”

I open one eye and see him grinning at me.

“She reminds me of you, actually.”

I grimace. “We do have a lot in common, but I don’t exactly love being compared to my mama, especially by the man I’m dating.”

We both freeze at my words, and I instantly wish I could take back that last part.

“Is that what we’re doing?” he asks, voice soft. “Dating?”

I swallow my nerves and go for it. “Well, that’s how I see it. But how about you?”

To my deep relief, he gives a slow nod.

“Aye, it’s been quick, there’s no doubt about that. But we were both single when we met, and we don’t want to see anyone else at the moment, do we?”

“Heck, no!”

His lips twitch. “Me neither.” His expression sobers. “I won’t lie. This connection that we have isn’t something I can simply dismiss as a fluke, but I also know your time here in London isn’t indefinite.”

“My plane is scheduled to leave a week from today,” I admit.

His brow furrows and he searches my face. “What does that mean for us?”

“I don’t know,” I say, and take hold of his hand in mine. “What I do know is that at this moment, I don’t want this thing between us to end when I leave.”

“Neither do I,” he says, his voice raspy with emotion.

Relief washes over me. “I don’t know how we’ll proceed once I return home, but I’m confident we can figure it out. And if this is meant to be, we’ll make it work, distance or no distance.”

“We’ll figure it out together, all right?”

“Sounds like a plan to me, sugar. Now about that shower...” I say, waggling my eyebrows.

Callum laughs, and the beautiful sound makes me fall for him a little bit more.

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CHAPTER TWENTY



RULE #150: MAKE SURE YOUR MOBILE IS ON SILENT WHEN GHOST HUNTING

In our modern age, it can be easy to forget to switch your mobile to silent mode. But this becomes especially important when ghost hunting.

If you're attempting to maintain stealth, the sudden blaring of your ringtone in the eerie silence of a haunted building is going to alert every ghost in the vicinity to your precise location. Worse, they may assume you are trying to contact them.

Additionally, some ghosts are startled by loud noises. A ringing phone could send a spirit into a full spectral meltdown, thus making your job that much more difficult.

Under no circumstances should you answer your phone while pursuing ghosts. This is both tactically unsound and, quite frankly, embarrassing. Maintain professionalism at all times.

Lastly, tormenting spirits is, in a nutshell, bad form. If they are lingering in this world, they are probably having a difficult time of it already. Don't be a jerk.

*—ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines
(Revised Edition)*

CALLUM

Ken Armstrong is waiting for us at a table by the window when we arrive at the coffee shop the next morning.

Beau offers to get our coffees while I sit down with Ken. At seventy years old, Ken Armstrong still looks remarkably fit, and it's not hard to see why he was a bouncer back in the day. His hair and beard are gray, both cut short and clean. Dressed in jeans and a tight T-shirt that shows off his still muscular arms, Ken could easily pass for ten years younger or more.

Note to self: Do not stop weight training with age.

We shake hands, and I introduce myself. We chitchat about nothing terribly consequential until Beau joins us a few moments later with coffees in hand.

I pull out my notepad, and Beau gives Ken a blindingly bright smile.

"Hello, Mr. Armstrong. It's a real pleasure to meet you. My name is Beau Montgomery, and as you might be able to tell, I'm not from around here."

He chuckles and Ken smiles.

"I run a little travel and queer history podcast back home and came over here recently to do some research for a couple of upcoming episodes on nightclubs and other establishments from previous eras that were frequented by LGBTQ+ folks." He leans forward, eyes sparkling. "As a gay man, I love learning about my forebears and how they created community even in times where they had to keep their sexuality or gender identity hidden in public."

"I suggested we do some sleuthing into London's nightclub scene in the last century and we stumbled across some intriguing accounts of the Midnight Vault that made us want to learn more," I add.

Beau beams at Ken. "When we looked into the club further, we found information on some of the people that used to work there and your name was among them. You were a bouncer, right? We're sure hoping you can tell us some of your recollections of the club's heyday in the 1970s."

Ken sips his own coffee. "It surprised me when you reached out about the club. God, I haven't heard anyone mention the Midnight Vault in years.

A relic of a bygone era, that it was,” he muses. “I worked there for two years. It was fun. Of course, I was a young man then, in my very early twenties.” He chuckles at the memory.

“What was the club like?” Beau asks with a guileless smile.

Ken leans back in his chair, settling in. “Well, it was pretty popular with people my age at the time. I don’t mind telling you, my love life didn’t suffer! The décor was—well, I’m no interior designer, so let’s just say the disco theme was everywhere. They had one of those big mirror balls hanging from the ceiling and a segment of the floor was built from those illuminated color squares that shifted and changed while people danced. The DJ even used strobe lights in tandem with the beat of the music he played.”

“It sounds amazing,” Beau replies. “I can picture it now.”

Ken shakes his head and laughs. “It could get pretty wild some nights, though, that’s for sure.”

Beau grins. “I bet.”

“What can you tell us about the nightclub owner?” I ask.

Beau reaches under the table and flicks my knee hard.

I blink at him innocently.

Ken barks out a laugh. “Oi, mate. You almost sounded like a copper just then.”

Beau pinches me, and I grunt in pain.

“Callum comes off that way to a lot of folks. His social skills are still a work in progress, aren’t they, sugar?” he says, holding my hand up to his lips and kissing it.

“So you two are an item? That makes a lot more sense now,” Ken says with a smile.

“That we are.” Beau puffs up with pride. “I had to cross an ocean to find the sexy man of my dreams. Totally worth it, I don’t mind telling you.”

I don’t know what compels me to do it, but I lean over and kiss him on the cheek.

The surprised but happy look on his face is well worth it.

Ken strokes his short, gray beard. “So, Callum, you want to know about Reggie?”

“That was the name we found in some historical records,” Beau says. “We’re hoping that we’d be able to learn more about the building’s history by knowing Reggie.”

Ken sighs. “Well, I don’t like to speak ill of someone behind their back, but Reggie was a wrong’un.”

“Oh?” I ask, perking up.

“He always felt... sleazy, if you know what I mean. Reggie was always looking for ways to make a quick buck. As far as I could tell, the business was legit, but I was barely legal at the time, so it’s not like I had anything to base that on. And who knows where he got the money for all those renovations? I do remember that he cut corners where he could and paid a lot of us under the table to save on his taxes.”

“Was the club financially successful?” Beau asks. “Did anyone have issues with the LGBTQ folks who went there?”

Ken considers this. “As far as I remember, the club was making good money. Yeah, there were a fair few gay guys who were regulars, some of them friends of the bartender, Peter. But folks kept that pretty quiet back then. We didn’t have too many issues apart from an occasional fight or two if someone hit on the wrong bloke. Peter’s friends mostly knew who was *family*, as they called it, and were cautious with anyone else.”

“That makes sense,” Beau says. “Even today, I have to be vigilant in certain places and situations as an out and proud gay man.” He points to his matching rainbow bow tie and suspenders. “I don’t exactly hide it.”

Ken gives him a gentle smile. “Times have changed since back then, but there’s still a long way to go, isn’t there?”

Beau nods, his attention rapt.

“In those days, nightclubs were popping up all over the city. The Midnight Vault was in a good location so it was busy most nights, but especially on weekends.” He chuckles and runs a hand over his short hair. “Back then, we didn’t have cell phones or the internet. Shit, we barely had bloody video games. For a lot of us, if we weren’t at the pub, we were at a club, regardless of the date.”

“Sounds profitable to me,” I offer.

“As far as I could tell from the front door, sure. The problems really started I think because Reggie had a liking for the ponies.”

“Gambling?” I say, my detective inspector internal radar going on high alert.

“How did you find out about that?” Beau asks, and I shoot him a smile and a nod of approval.

Ken laughs. "It wasn't a secret. Everybody bloody knew. Reggie wasn't exactly quiet about it. He bet on horse racing all the time, bragging whenever he won money and raging when he lost. But I also heard that he used to frequent some of the private casinos down in Mayfair. That's what Peter told me one time, anyway. Those were members-only clubs though, and I don't know how he got himself a membership, so who knows? He may have gone to illegal casinos instead and Peter was just mixed up. I don't know for sure. In those days, they were cracking down a lot on underground gambling in the city, but it still happened if you knew where to look."

Beau waves a hand airily. "My mama always says *A fool and his money are soon parted.*"

Ken leans back in his chair and crosses his still muscular arms over his chest. "That's the god's honest truth. Reggie wasn't too bright about such things. All I know is that Peter was getting worried in the weeks leading up to the fire. He told me that Reggie'd gotten himself in a bit too deep with his bookie and Peter thought he'd started using money from the club account to pay off his gambling debts."

Now we're talking a potential motive here.

"How did Peter know about all of this?" I ask.

"He and Reggie were kind of unofficial business partners, I guess. Reggie was the owner, but he left most of the running of the club to Peter."

"Sounds like Reggie was taking advantage of Peter, if you ask me," Beau chimes in with a frown.

Ken's expression turns sad. "You're right about that. But Peter'd had trouble with other jobs because he was like you, Beau, out and proud, at a time when that was bloody hard. Lots of prejudice in those days, and you could lose jobs because of it. From what I saw, Reggie was more concerned with making money than with Peter's sexuality. As long as the club was bringing in plenty of cash, he let Peter run the show."

I frown. "Is there anything else you can tell us about Reggie? Something that might help us track him down?"

"Hmm. Well, I suppose the one thing Reggie did right was taking responsibility for his nephew, Owen. Real young he was when I met him. Fourteen or fifteen? Something like that. Anyway, his mother died when he was about ten, and Reggie took him in."

“That’s interesting. Was Owen like his uncle? Did he help out at the club?” Beau asks with guileless curiosity.

“Nothing at all like Reggie, which was honestly a bit surprising. Real quiet guy. He was too young to be in the club at night but he’d come round during the day sometimes to help us with liquor deliveries and tidying up after the night before. Reggie’d pay me extra under the table to come in during the day from time to time to move heavy liquor boxes and other equipment. He made good use of his nephew too. Owen once told me he wanted to make sure and earn his keep. I didn’t mind, the kid would regularly mop down the floors and clean the toilets and that meant I didn’t have to. His uncle didn’t pay him anything for it, but Owen was happy. He really looked up to Reggie.” Ken frowns. “Anyway, I’m not really sure what happened to him. I kind of lost track of both of them after the fire.”

“Were you there when the fire happened?” Beau asks with concern. “From what I read, it sounds like that was a real tragedy. Apparently, there were some people still in the building who couldn’t get out? I can’t imagine living with that memory.”

Ken’s expression turns grim. “No, I wasn’t there. If I had been, I’d have fought like hell to get people out of there.”

“Did you know any of those poor folks who died in the fire?” Beau asks.

Ken’s eyes fill with sadness. “Yeah, most of them. Peter was the head bartender, great guy. I’ll tell you, I was shocked when I first found out he was gay. I was a right wanker back then, had a lot of idiotic notions about how gay men must all be effeminate and like to wear women’s clothing. Peter was a real man’s man, if you know what I mean.” He smirks. “Even in the ridiculous clothing of the era. Which, I’m sad to say, I didn’t pull off well.”

Beau giggles. “I’ve seen some pictures of the era’s fashion. It was quite something to behold!”

Ken eyes Beau’s own attire with obvious amusement but doesn’t say anything.

“Can you tell us more about Peter? You’ve mentioned him a lot, and he sounds like an important figure for our research,” I say.

Beau gives me a thumbs-up under the table.

“Like I said before, he basically handled running the club and served as the main bartender. You’d probably be more interested in the fact that he ran

a kind of underground gay club in the basement after hours. Not every night, mind you, but a lot of the time.”

“Oh, that is quite fascinating,” Beau says, “and not only from a historical perspective for our podcast. As a proud twenty-first-century gay man, I always enjoy learning about these bits of the past. There were a number of gay and lesbian bars in urban metropolises like New York, San Francisco, and Chicago during that time, but they still faced a lot of challenges, even after Stonewall.”

Ken nods. “It was similar here, I think. But, I admit, as a straight man I’m no expert on the subject.”

Beau softens his tone, exuding that captivating charm of his. “Do you remember much about the basement? What was it like? We didn’t know it was in use until talking to you.”

That last bit’s a total fib but I wouldn’t know that if I wasn’t working with him. Fucking hell. Beau’s better at this than me. I should start taking notes on his technique.

Ken’s brows furrow in thought. “I never spent much time down there. One day early on, Peter asked me to come in on our one night off, and I helped him take some furniture and other things down. He was setting up a mini bar of sorts.”

“Reggie allowed that?” I ask.

“Mm-hmm. Not sure if he knew about it or not. It might have been Peter’s secret way to get some extra perks out of running the place for Reggie.” He strokes his short beard. “I don’t know a whole lot more than that. I usually went home after my shift ended because I had another part-time job. It started bloody early in the morning, and I needed to get a few hours of sleep in beforehand.” His gaze goes distant in thought. “I do know there were some others who stuck around with Peter after closing pretty often. Not gay, more what you’d call allies now.”

Beau bobs his head along in agreement. “Sounds like Peter created a valuable safe space for other LGBTQ folks at a time when they really needed it.”

“Peter was a stand-up guy, and he and I became good friends in those two years we worked together. And those young guys he took under his wing at the club were all good’uns.” He scratches his chin. “Looking back, I regret that I kept my distance from them. I didn’t have anything against those guys, but I still had a lot of what they call *internalized homophobia*.

I'm a lot more educated on these things now. Partly from time—things have changed a whole load since back then—but mostly because I have a grandson who came out about five years ago. When he did, I made it my mission to learn everything I could to support him. I only wish I'd done more to help Peter and his friends too." He sighs. "Trust me, don't get to my age and have big regrets."

"Your friendship with Peter probably meant more to him than you realize. And the fact that you've changed and have taken it upon yourself to become better educated about LGBTQ+ identities is amazin'. A lot of folks your age might not have done the same. I'm sure your grandson appreciates it," Beau says, his voice full of encouragement.

Ken gets a little misty-eyed at that and pulls out his phone to proudly show off his grandkids.

Beau oohs and ahhs over them, and offers Ken one of the tasty praline treats he carries around, which the older man accepts with an amused smile.

After we've given them appropriate recognition, I clear my throat, trying to get us back to the key issue at hand. "I must admit, the basement of the building sounds like it might have been an unexpected death trap. Based on what we've been able to tell from public records, if a fire started on a floor above, anyone in the basement who didn't realize it in time could have become trapped down there."

"You two sure have done your homework on the club. I didn't know so much was in the public records."

"Yes, sir. We like to be thorough." Beau elbows me under the table. "Callum, remember what we talked about when it comes to delicacy and tact, darlin'? I'm sure that fire was a traumatizing event for everyone who worked at the club, including Mr. Ken." He turns to Ken with an apologetic look. "Sorry, like I said earlier, he's still a work in progress."

"No worries, mate. You two are bigger history nerds than I realized."

Beau's answering chuckle is a bit forced and I attempt a smile.

Thankfully, Ken doesn't find anything amiss.

"You two are a hoot," he says with a grin. "As for the fire, I'm not sure where it started. That old building was huge, but we only used the lower levels. A fire anywhere in that place would have been dangerous, especially since the upper floors hadn't been renovated. Later, I read in the paper that it was an electrical fire that caused the whole thing. But that's all I know."

“Yeah, we read some of those old articles. Did an electrical fire seem likely to you?” I ask, careful to keep my voice as neutral as possible.

He shrugs. “Don’t know a lot about that kind of stuff. Wouldn’t put it past Reggie to have paid some plonker to wire the place up on the cheap, and they must have made a real mess of it.” He frowns. “Funny though. I recall Reggie finding out everything passed inspection the day he hired me. I remember because he gave out a round of drinks to everyone there at the time. Hard to forget that right on the heels of getting my first real job.”

I scribble a few notes to return to.

“From what we found in old records, a couple of people who’d stayed after closing made it out before the fire got really bad. Did you know any of them?”

“No. I didn’t even know there were any survivors. I never really got back in touch with anyone from the club after that night. God, it’s been decades now.”

Beau leans forward. “Can you think of anyone we could talk to who might know where Reggie is? If we can track him down and talk to him, we’d love to hear his stories about the club too, ask him about the underground gay club. He might even have some old pictures we could post on the podcast website.”

Ken strokes his beard again, then shakes his head. “Sorry. Like I said, I haven’t kept in contact with anyone from those days. Can barely even remember the names of anyone else I worked with from back then. Time’s a sonofabitch. Some days I can’t believe I’m seventy now.”

Beau smiles charmingly. “Totally understandable. We’ll see if we can track him down on our own.”

As the conversation winds down, I find an opportune moment to get to my feet, and both Ken and Beau join me.

I reach out my hand and shake Ken’s again. “Thank you so much for your time. We’ve learned a lot, and we appreciate you sharing what you remember from back then.”

Ken pulls out a card and hands it to Beau. “My grandson helped me get these made for my Instagram channel. I meet people all the time who want to learn how to stay fit as they get older so it helps to have these to give them. It’s got my email address on the back. If you get a chance, could you send me some information about your show? My grandson might be interested in it.”

“Yes, sir. It’s been a real pleasure speaking with you today. We need to be on our way, but you take care now, you hear?”

Outside, we wave our goodbyes and head off in opposite directions.

“Well, that conversation sure was enlightening. The plot thickens, as they say,” Beau muses.

“We’ve got our next objective confirmed. We need to track down Reggie and his nephew.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



So I've been reading up on the most haunted spots in London, and boy howdy, are there a lot of them! I'll admit, I'm not even sure where to start.

Now, one spot I definitely need to check out is the Tower of London. The stories about that place are absolutely fascinating. Then again, places associated with tragic death often have a higher likelihood of spirits lingering around. The Tower of London's history is bloodier than most, that's for sure.

Will I meet the ghost of Anne Boleyn? She's reported to haunt a chapel there. Then there's the Princes in the Tower. Personally, the spirits of children always break my heart, so I hope I don't run into them. But heck, y'all, there's even supposed to be the spirit of a bear in the Tower! Now that would be a new one for me, I guarantee it.

I'll let you know what happens, but I sure do hope I get to meet that ghostly ursid!

—Beau's Boos and Beyond, Episode 68

After we part from Ken, Callum pulls out his phone and starts filling Liz in on what we've found.

"Put her on speaker," I whisper.

He nods once he finishes the story. "I'm putting you on speaker, Liz, so Beau can hear too."

"Let me guess," Liz says dryly. "You two want me to help you track down the owner and his nephew."

"See, you still get me," Callum says with a grin.

I snort out a laugh.

"We have reason to believe they're not in London anymore, which is why you might be able to find them faster than we can," Callum adds.

Liz heaves a put-upon sigh. "Fine. I'll try, but no guarantees."

"Of course," Callum agrees.

"In the meantime," I add, "we're going to work on locating the people who escaped the building that night. From what we've uncovered, a few may have managed to get out before the fire turned deadly."

"Aye," Callum says. "If any of them are still alive and in London, we should be able to find them."

"You still think there's something fishy with the findings of the arson investigation?" Liz asks, tone serious.

Callum's tone matches Liz's. "Too many things aren't quite adding up. And now we learn the owner was in debt because of a gambling problem."

"Are you thinking insurance fraud?" she asks, voice sharp.

"Something like that seems likely, yes."

"The payout from an accidental fire would probably arrive right on time to solve all his problems," I add. "How convenient."

"Let me know what the witnesses say, if you can locate any of them. I'm starting to think you might be right about needing to reopen the case. Now we just need more evidence so my superiors agree. In the meantime, I'll see what I can discover on the uncle and nephew." She hesitates. "Are you planning to contact the fire investigator?"

Callum's expression turns determined. "You're fucking right I am. I want to look him in the eye when I ask about this case and see if he flinches."

"Tread carefully there," she warns.

"I will."

They hang up and I point to an iconic structure not too far away from where we stand.

“Before we get back to our internet sleuthing, how about we make a little tourism pit stop at the Tower of London?”

Callum crosses his arms and stares me down in a way that makes my balls tingle.

Damn, he’s sexy. I wonder what he looks like in a kilt...

“Please tell me you’re not wanting to go there because it’s supposedly haunted.”

I paste on my most innocent look.

He groans. “Fucking hell.”

Grinning, I link my arm with his. “Come on, sugar, this’ll be fun. Besides, you promised to be my London tour guide. We’ve been so focused on this case we haven’t fit in much sightseeing, so we have a lot of making up to do!”

Grudgingly, he allows me to pull him along and we get in line for tickets.

Before long, we’re entering the Tower, and the first thing that strikes me is how darn cold it is.

I pull my jacket tighter and shiver. “Is it always so cold in here?”

A uniformed guard, called a Yeoman Warder, overhears me and gives a lengthy spiel about the architecture of the Tower and how the thick medieval stone keeps the place cold even in the middle of summer. It’s all fascinating, but I sure wouldn’t want to live here.

“Lord, I can only imagine how bone chilling it must be in the winter!” I turn to Callum. “This place would benefit from some serious insulation and a fireplace in every room.”

“I’ll be sure to tell the architect if we stumble across his ghost,” he offers dryly.

I gasp. “Why, Callum Fraser, are you making *another* paranormal jest? You’re becoming so sassy! I *like* it.”

“I guess you bring it out in me,” he deadpans.

That makes me laugh out loud. Gosh darn it, the man’s adorable and quite fun when he lets himself unclench a smidge. I like to think I’m helping him with that.

As we follow a tour guide through some of the different rooms, I keep my ghost detecting antennae on high alert, but I’m distracted by how hot

Callum is. It's been too long since our last naked rendezvous.

Callum leans down and whispers in my ear, "Sensing any spirits?"

What I'm mainly sensing is a growing need to ride him like a bucking bronco.

Our previous hanky-panky was mighty enjoyable, but sometimes, a gay Southern boy like me needs to be fucked—pardon my French.

"Beau?" Callum asks, his brow furrowing in concern.

I shake off my randy thoughts and quietly tell my dick to settle down. *Time and place, pardner!*

"I can sense the presence of spirits here," I admit honestly, "but they don't seem inclined to come out right now. A lot of spirits prefer to roam at night, when they typically have more spectral energy to manifest so others might be able to see them."

"Well, we're not bloody well coming back here in the dead of night," Callum warns.

"But—" I protest.

"Besides," he interrupts, "they're only open until 5:30 in the evening this time of year. And once winter hits, 4:30." He smiles smugly.

"Well, shoot," I mutter, disappointed.

But I perk right back up when Callum pulls me into his side and drapes an arm over my shoulders as we continue to tour the Tower. He smells faintly of his aftershave but the rest is all eau de Callum Fraser—my new favorite scent.

When we make it to the room with the Crown Jewels, I can't keep my jaw off the floor.

"Are those all *real*?"

Callum scoffs. "Aye, the British monarchy spent a few hundred years or more plundering the riches of other countries to enrich themselves. Blood jewels if you ask me." He scowls. "And don't get me started on what they did to us Scots and the Stone of Destiny."

I make a note to ask more about that later, but not here under the watchful eye of the room attendant.

"Honestly, I'm not sure anyone could pull these enormous jewels off except for Miz Dolly Parton—God rest her sweet, beautiful soul. There wasn't anyone who could outshine her. She may have been the rhinestone queen, but if there is a heaven, she's probably sitting there on a throne

decked out in jewels even bigger than these. And looking fabulous too, I might add.”

Callum’s lips twitch. “Dolly Parton, eh? I *never* would have guessed you had a thing for her. Even the pink rhinestone bow tie and matching suspenders went right over my head.”

I gape at him. “Sir, you’re sassin’ me, aren’t ya? My love for all things Dolly Parton is practically tattooed on my forehead.”

“You don’t say,” he deadpans.

I chuckle and press myself into his side. “Miz Parton’s music saved my life as a gay boy ghost whisperer growing up in Alabama, and she will always be my hero and role model. Few people in this world can match the level of philanthropy she did with little to no fanfare.” I shake my head. “If more people were like Miz Parton, the world would be a better place.”

To my surprise, Callum leans down right there and plants a big old kiss on me. Again.

The one in the coffee shop threw me, but this time I’m ready for him.

Matching his boldness, I go right along with it and kiss him for all I’m worth. Melting into him like butter on a hot biscuit, I feel my insides go equally soft and gooey.

Those ideas of riding him to Orgasm Station come roaring on back into my brain and travel right down to my balls, making them tingle.

When he pulls back from me, a smug look of satisfaction on his face, I want nothing more than to dazzle him as much as he does me.

“What do you say we wrap up this tour and head back to your place?” I whisper, my voice full of seductive promise.

I grab the back of his neck, pulling his face down to my level again.

Then I gently bite his bottom lip and suck on it to soothe the sting. Reaching my hand up, I stroke his stubbly cheek—*yum*—and say, “The sooner we get back to your place, the sooner I can ride you like the bedroom rodeo queen I am, sugar.”

A dark glimmer of desire flares in Callum’s eyes and sets my heart racing. My libido does a little victory dance.

I don’t even mind when Callum takes hold of my hand and makes a beeline for the exit like he’s in hot pursuit of a suspect.

There’s more of the Tower that I would like to see someday, but right now, my physical needs are superseding any of my ghost-whisperer curiosity about this historic haunted landmark. Besides, the spirits didn’t

seem inclined to come out and say hello today anyway, so trying another time just makes sense.

I am surprised, however, when Callum ends up hailing an actual taxicab, *cost be damned* as he tells me.

When we get in, he gives the driver his address and pulls me into his lap. The driver nods his head and sets the meter going, then begins weaving and bobbing through London's side streets on a route only he seems to know in order to get us to Callum's place as quickly as possible.

In the back seat, I don't even bother with a seat belt. Instead, I make myself at home in Callum's lap, wrapping myself around him like a friendly anaconda with no intention of letting him go. We kiss with a fiery passion that sets my whole body aflame. Time passes and I lose track of everything except the touch and taste of Callum.

I'm on the edge of desperate need when the taxicab finally comes to a jarring halt. Callum reaches into his pocket, pulls out his wallet, and tosses several bills at the driver with a curt thanks before half-carrying me up to his apartment.

Once inside, Callum closes the door and slams my back up against it. My legs wrap around his hips as we maul one another's mouths and tear at each other's clothes. Somehow, we manage to get naked and stumble to his bedroom without injuring ourselves, but once there, I shake off some of the haze of lust, not wanting to lose sight of my mission.

I gently shove Callum down on the bed, admiring his thick erection. Nothing about Callum Fraser is small, that's for sure.

"Condoms?" I ask with an arched eyebrow.

He flaps a hand at the bedside table and I open the drawer, triumphantly pulling out a foil packet, then squeaking when he pulls me down on top of him.

"So you want to ride me, do you?" he asks in a deep, rumbling voice that has me shuddering with need.

"You bet your bippy I do."

He blinks at me in confusion. "You have some of the oddest expressions."

I arch my eyebrow. "I have some odd expressions? Sir, I think we could take a tally on both sides, don't you?"

He rolls his eyes, then reaches down and lightly smacks my ass cheek. I gasp and he grins.

“Why don’t you let me get you ready for this rodeo?” he says, his voice sultry and tantalizing.

That Scottish accent isn’t playing fair in the bedroom. It’s too darn sexy.

I lick my lips. “Oh, are you talented at that?”

He narrows his eyes. “Why don’t you see for yourself?”

He reaches over and pumps a generous amount of lube into his hand from his very conveniently placed bottle on his nightstand.

Good job, Callum.

He moves his unlubed hand down to squeeze my ass cheek and uses the other to swipe a slick line down my ass crack. I gasp, and his finger traces up and down, teasing over my hole but not yet giving me what I want. I moan with need.

The arms I’ve been using to try and hold myself up give out on me entirely, and I let myself enjoy Callum’s sensual exploration.

I quickly learn there are some serious advantages to being with an older man.

Callum takes his time with me, slowly circling my entrance and tapping my puckered hole, sending vibrations through my entire body. The whole time he watches me, gauging my reactions and modifying his gentlemanly attentions to give me more of what I like.

He isn’t in a hurry. Instead, he’s entirely absorbed in getting me ready in a manner that’s highly enjoyable, building the anticipation for us both rather than rushing to the finish line.

Now, don’t get me wrong. It can be fun to have it fast and a little rough sometimes, but my taste for it has admittedly declined in recent years. I still enjoy a good hard fucking, but it’s always so much more enjoyable when I’m appropriately prepared for it—and that takes time.

With gentle but determined focus, Callum presses a finger inside me and I concentrate on letting my muscles relax. With his other big, warm hand, he strokes my back.

“That’s right, beautiful. There’s no rush. Let’s properly loosen you up for me.”

My channel relaxes its tight grip after a moment, and he starts sliding his finger in and out of me. Once he gets two of them inside me, I gasp at the feeling of fullness. Callum’s fingers are long and thick and already have me salivating at the idea of what his cock will feel like.

Then he crooks his fingers and makes contact with my prostate. I darn near pull a muscle with the whiplash I give myself. "Oh, sweet heavens!"

"You like that, do you?" Callum says, clearly proud of himself.

I stick out my bottom lip and blow out air to move the damp hair from my eyes. "Is the sky blue, honey? Of course I like it, so get back to work."

He chuckles and starts thrusting both fingers in and out of me. The lewd noise of his actions echo in the room, turning me on even more. My cock is so hard it aches by the time he's able to get a third finger inside me, barely.

That's when I've had enough.

I reach back and remove his fingers, then sit up. "That's enough. I'm ready," I pant.

Callum frowns. "Are you sure?"

I smile. "Trust me, sugar. I know my body." I tilt my head to the side. "If that's what you still want?"

"Fuck yeah," he growls.

I grin to myself, feeling rather triumphant.

It takes me a hot second to fumble about in the sheets and find the condom packet, but after that, I don't waste time, quickly opening it and rolling the latex down Callum's hard shaft. Holding his cock steady, I align the head of it with my entrance. Real slow and careful, I bear down as I start to take him inside me.

The muscles in Callum's neck stand out in stark relief, and his hands grip the sheets as if he's hanging on for dear life. I can tell it's taking a lot to hold himself still for me, and my heart goes as warm and gooey as a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie.

Callum's a lot sweeter and more caring than he lets on. Even with desire taking over reason, he's still treating me like I mean something to him, like I'm—dare I hope—precious to him.

At this moment, I know in my heart of hearts that Callum would never deliberately hurt me, and there's something freeing about that knowledge.

I can trust him with my body and I'm starting to believe I can trust him with my heart too.

When I finally come to rest against his pelvis again, his cock embedded in me up to the hilt, I'm panting and sweating from exertion. It's no small task taking a well-endowed man into your body, but my determination won the day.

"You all right?" Callum asks, his accent thicker than usual.

I love it when I'm the cause of that!

"Give me a moment, darlin'," I say as I focus on relaxing my protesting muscles.

Slow and steady wins the race, as they say, and after a few minutes, I triumph. Now that I've unclenched enough to enjoy it, I sigh with pleasure at the sensation of fullness inside me. This is something I've always loved about bottoming, and it's always so much better with the right man. And let me tell you, Callum Fraser is so much righter for me than anyone I've ever been with.

Once we're both ready, I start to move up and down, savoring the glide of his cock as it slides in and almost out of me. I shudder at the instantaneous pleasure that courses through my body and soon pick up my pace, riding him with greater force. After all, I need to live up to my self-appointed title of Bedroom Rodeo Queen.

Callum reaches between us and takes hold of my cock in his big, warm hand. Then that devious man starts jacking me in time with my bouncing, and I ride him for all I'm worth.

With his glorious cock filling me and him jacking my own dick, it isn't long until I'm reaching the precipice. My body loses its earlier finesse, and I become jerky and desperate as I strain for the finish line.

That's when Callum takes hold of my hips and with a guttural noise flips us over so that I'm now underneath him.

Instinctually, I wrap my legs around him and he pounds into me with a ferocity that leaves me breathless. All that prior restraint is gone, and he's single-minded in his focus. A few hard thrusts as he pegs my prostate and I'm seeing stars as I come with what feels like enough force to blow off the top of a fire hydrant.

Callum continues slamming into me, and my nerve endings are so highly sensitized that it makes the lingering pleasure of my orgasm last longer.

Moments later, Callum finally cries out his own release and collapses on top of me, utterly spent. I stroke his sweaty hair and back as we both catch our breath.

I'm entirely blissed out and already thinking about the next time we can do this. But even though my cock likes the idea of that, it's nowhere near ready to go for a round two. Alas.

After a few minutes, Callum heaves himself off me and moves onto his back next to me.

“Bedroom rodeo queen is right,” he murmurs. “That was fucking amazing.”

I turn my head and grin at him. “I’m a man of many talents.”

He pulls off the condom, ties it, and drops it in the wastebasket.

“If you were any more talented, I’m worried I might not survive.”

I poke him in the side and laugh. “Ditto, sugar. I swear I saw stars, maybe a supernova or two. That was out of this world.”

He turns to his side and faces me, his expression all soft and oddly vulnerable. “This is real, isn’t it? You and me, I mean.” He blushes. “And it’s not post-orgasm glow talking, I swear.”

I chuckle and reach over to stroke his stubbled cheek tenderly. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you all along, darlin’. A force more powerful than we can understand brought us together for a reason, and it’s not just to partner up on this case. It’s so much deeper than that.”

He rests his hand over mine, holding it to his cheek like a lifeline. “Is it stupid of me to say I’m scared?” His words come out in a grumble, but there’s an edge of uncertainty to it.

“I’m scared too,” I admit. “I’ve never experienced a connection like this with anyone besides you. When it comes to us being together, I don’t have any doubts.”

“You truly believe we can make this work? London’s a long way from Alabama.”

I run my fingers through the hair on his chest. “We’ll figure it out. For now, let’s enjoy the time we have and let the cards fall where they may. I’ve been at this a lot longer than you, sugar, and one thing I’ve learned is to trust in where the universe leads me. You just need to come along.”

He’s quiet for a moment, then says, “Believe me, I want to. *That* I can say for sure.”

“Darlin’, that is more than enough right now.”

And I snuggle him tight like there’s no tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



RULE #175: WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, BE POLITE

Sometimes, manners can go a long way in quelling the animosity of some spirits when other options fail. As in life, treating others politely can smooth the waters, so to speak.

Some spirits simply want someone to hear their tale of woe and nod along sympathetically. If you indulge them, they may be more inclined to tone down their behavior.

This is not a solution for evicting a spirit from haunted premises! However, it can buy you some time until you come up with another plan of action.

—ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines (Revised Edition)

CALLUM

“Gloria Tate?”

A woman in her early sixties, with a shoulder-length bob of dark hair liberally streaked with gray, smiles at me from her front door’s threshold.

“You must be Callum.”

Beau extends his right hand. “And I’m Beau Montgomery, ma’am.”

“Come inside. We can talk in the kitchen if that’s all right.”

We follow her into a small, cozy flat filled with all kinds of plants. The walls are covered with framed photos of family and friends, as well as Gloria’s travels over the years.

She seats us at a round kitchen table while she puts the kettle on for tea.

After our round of mind-blowing sex yesterday afternoon, we spent the rest of the evening searching for some of the people referenced in the arson investigation notes. We struck out with two who had already passed away, but we got lucky with Gloria, one of the people interviewed who’d managed to escape the building before it was too late.

Once the tea’s ready, she joins us, placing a steaming pot on the table followed by a plate of biscuits on two trivets. “How do you take it?”

“Milk, no sugar, please,” I say.

“Milk and plenty of sugar for me, please,” Beau says.

She fixes our cups and hands them to us, then prepares her own.

“Would you like a biscuit, luv?” she asks Beau, motioning to the plate.

His lips twitch and he takes the proffered biscuit. “Thank you kindly, ma’am.”

I smirk at him and he mouths back, *Cookie*.

There’s a cocky look of challenge in his eyes that I like entirely too much.

It makes me think about last night...

Don’t lose focus, Callum.

“We know it’s been a long time since the night of the fire at the Midnight Vault, but we’d appreciate you telling us anything you might remember,” I say.

Beau gives me a hidden thumbs-up. He coached me the whole way here on how to tone down what he calls my Intimidating Detective Inspector Interrogation Technique.

Gloria sips her tea as she considers my request. “It’s not a good memory. I still have nightmares from time to time.”

Beau leans forward, the picture of earnest concern. “Of course. It’s amazing you survived such a tragic event.”

Gloria shares a sad smile. “I had survivor’s guilt for a long time.”

“You don’t have to share anything you’re not comfortable with,” Beau reassures her.

“It’s okay. Some of my friends died in that fire and their memory deserves to go on. It sounds like your podcast might help with that.”

“I’ll certainly try to do them justice,” Beau confirms.

Prior to coming, we’d agreed to add an element to our cover story for her—namely remembering the lives lost in the fire at this nightclub that was frequented by members of the LGBTQ+ community at the time.

Gloria sets down her cup and gazes out the window. “I was barely eighteen and a bit wild. I’d snuck out of the house to meet some friends at the club.” She smiles in recollection. “Things started off great. We danced for hours, living it up in the way you only can when you’re young. God, how I miss that. Menopause is a real bitch, pardon my French.”

“My mama tells me the same thing.” Beau’s look of understanding makes Gloria relax even more.

Damn it, but he’s good at this. He’s got a way with people that I can’t match.

Gloria continues. “After closing, I stuck around with some of the regulars. Archie and I went to school together, so he’d invited me. I was one of the only people he’d told that he was gay. He knew I’d never spill his secret. His parents weren’t bad people but in those days I don’t know if they would have accepted that part of him. Not easily, anyway. So Archie went to the Vault a lot, especially once he found some other gay guys to be friends with. The bartender and Jonathan. I can’t remember his last name.”

“From what we’ve found, the bartender was named Peter.”

Gloria’s eyes spark with recognition. “That’s right. He was a bit older and acted a lot like a mentor to the younger guys.”

“Did you go with Archie to the club often?”

She shakes her head. “I’d only been a handful of times.” She winces. “It wasn’t easy for me to give my parents the slip when I was living at home, especially after I’d gotten in trouble a few times. Anyway, the night of the fire, we all went down into the basement after closing. Turned out the bartender, Peter, had a sort of side business going on, selling dope every so often to whoever stuck around and providing a place after hours where some of the gay guys could be more themselves and not worry about gay bashing. Anyone who wanted to go down to the basement got the

bartender's warning about not being an asshole and if they misbehaved, they got the boot."

Beau nods in commiseration. "He sounds like he was looking out for those kids. I can only imagine how hard it was back then. The elder gays lived through so much."

She smiles gently at him. "That they did."

"What happened once you were in the basement?" I ask, trying to steer the conversation back on track.

"We played some cards and drank, mostly. Peter started rolling joints and handing them out. I've had asthma since I was a kid, and after spending hours in a smoky club, I couldn't handle more in a basement with no airflow, so I made my excuses and left." She frowns. "I'd had a fair amount to drink that night, and by the time I made it back up to the ground floor, I was a little out of it. I didn't notice anything was wrong at first and didn't register the smoke until I started coughing. I couldn't tell where I was and then I kind of panicked. That's when two more people came up from downstairs. They figured out we were in danger faster than I did and made a mad dash for the exit. I tried following them but fell down. I think I tripped over something in the dark." Tears fill her eyes. "Looking back, I should have done something to warn the people still downstairs. But I could barely focus, the panic was so bad. All I could think about was getting out. My asthma was going full throttle and I honestly wasn't sure I was going to make it out alive." She swallows hard. "Right when I thought I was a goner, a young lad appeared out of nowhere and helped me out of the building. It was a bloody miracle."

I lean forward in my seat. "What? Did you know him?"

She shakes her head. "He was a few years younger than me though."

Beau and I share a loaded look. Big Mike's recollection about Owen hanging about outside the club that night is starting to sound more and more important.

"Could you tell us what happened once he got you outside?" I say.

"I'd never been so grateful in my entire life. Realized just how lucky I'd been." Her expression turns pained. "But I also realized that not everyone was going to make it out alive. The fire was terrifying, even from a safe distance. The fire brigade hadn't arrived yet and I was suffering from smoke inhalation so I couldn't really speak much. But I managed to tell the boy

who saved me that there were others still inside.” She shakes her head. “He ran back inside before I could stop him.”

“What?” Beau asks with alarm.

“I know. It was foolhardy of him, but brave. I don’t think I could have done it.”

“Did you see him again?” I ask.

She thinks for a moment. “No. By the time the fire brigade arrived, I was barely conscious. That time’s kind of a blank for me. Later, the newspapers reported who was found, and the only names I saw were of those people I’d been with in the basement, Archie and his friends.”

I look at Beau, whose eyes widen in understanding and he mouths, *Owen?*

Bingo, I mouth back.

Gloria sips her tea. “It’s been such a long time, but I’ll never forget how that fire felt as I was trying to escape.”

“What did you hear about the arson investigation afterward?” I pry. “You were interviewed, correct?”

She nods. “They took a statement from me. I mentioned the boy who saved me.” She frowns. “I thought they’d try to track him down to thank him, maybe give him some kind of formal recognition for what he did. But I never heard anything about him again. It was all rather strange.” She cradles her teacup in her hand, her gaze going distant.

“Honestly, I wasn’t paying a lot of attention. The next few days for me were spent in hospital recovering from the smoke inhalation and dealing with outraged but relieved parents.” Her eyes shimmer with tears again. “Then there were the funerals. I went to all of them, even though I didn’t know everyone as well as I did Archie. I felt like I had to, as a kind of apology. For a long time, I was haunted by the notion that I should have done more. That if I hadn’t panicked, if my asthma wasn’t so bad, maybe I could have saved the others too.” She shakes her head. “It took me a long time and years of therapy to accept the idea that I wasn’t at fault. But you never fully get over something like that.”

“That must have been so hard,” Beau murmurs, “but you’re right. None of it was your fault, and you were very lucky to come out of it alive.”

Gloria reaches over and pats his hand with a soft smile. “Yes, I really was.”

“Did you read anything about the investigation in the paper later?” I ask. “What did you think?”

Her brows furrow. “I’ll admit, it seemed like the whole thing was wrapped up rather fast. In the end, I read that it was faulty wiring, but I don’t know. I’m not an expert and wasn’t back then either, but the fire seemed to spread very quickly.” Sadness fills her eyes. “I know some of the families of those who died in the fire kept pushing for more answers, that was in the papers for a while, but once the case was closed, there wasn’t much they could do. It ate away at poor Archie’s parents. They were never the same again.”

“We’re sorry we asked you to revisit such painful memories, but we appreciate hearing your story. Tell me more about Archie. I want to make sure my podcast listeners hear as much as possible about his life.”

For the next little while, Gloria reminisces fondly about her friend and offers small recollections of the other men who died in the fire that night. Learning more about the spirits we’ve met and their former lives makes even me all that more determined to bring them the closure they need to move on.

As for Beau, he listens with rapt attention, his open face conveying every one of his emotions. Beau Montgomery is incredible, and probably one of the most compassionate men I’ve ever known.

What he sees in someone like me is hard for me to fathom, but I have no intention of turning him away from my bed while I still have the opportunity to be with him.

My heart, on the other hand, still has its reservations. Not because I don’t care for him, but because I’m worried that I’m starting to care *too* much. My self-protection instincts are on high alert and I’m trying not to let them sabotage things.

When we say our goodbyes, it’s still early and I surprise myself by spontaneously suggesting we take a stroll in Hyde Park.

The bright smile Beau gives me while taking my hand in his is like a reward. As we head that direction, he hums happily to himself, and I’m glad I suggested this little detour. I’ve had partners in the past tell me I’m utterly unromantic and I never disagreed. But somehow, Beau manages to bring out impulses that I’ve never experienced until now. And the delight he gets from our little dates makes me want to keep planning them just for him.

“Gloria certainly gave us quite a lot to mull over,” Beau says.

“Aye, she did. I’m beginning to wonder if Reggie and his nephew were both tied to the fire somehow.”

Beau nods. “Same. Between Big Mike mentioning that he saw Owen outside the club that night and Gloria’s mysterious rescuer being around his age, it’s definitely adding him to our short list of suspects.” He frowns. “But if Owen was involved, why help her? Why not get away as fast as he could?”

I shake my head. “Not sure, and I don’t want to speculate too much until we can talk to Reggie and Owen. I do think we’re finally on our way to getting some real answers though.”

I can only hope Liz comes through with information on wherever the hell those two men moved after leaving London. Finding them is our top priority.

Beau and I make our way deeper into the park and walk along the banks of The Serpentine, the man-made lake in the heart of the park. But the moment Beau spies people boating on the water he starts vibrating with excitement.

“Can we rent one of those?” he asks, pointing to a pedalo.

“Aye, if you want to.”

His eyes sparkle with enthusiasm and I immediately turn us toward The Boathouse, where, since it’s not busy at this time of year, we’re able to hire our own pedalo without a reservation. In no time at all, we’re in the water and pedaling along at a leisurely pace.

Beau tilts his head back and basks in the autumn sunshine that’s decided to appear. “This is glorious, isn’t it?”

I snort out a laugh. “Well, enjoy that sunshine while you can. It’s bound to disappear behind some clouds soon.”

Beau pouts. “Don’t rain on my parade, darlin’.”

“Only stating facts, beautiful. We’re into the cold, wet season now and will be here until spring.”

As we drift along, we pass some unperturbed geese bobbing lazily in the water, and even I start to relax. I can’t remember the last time I did something like this.

“Can I ask you something?” Beau asks, a hint of nervousness in his voice.

I turn to look at him. “What’s on your mind?”

He twiddles his thumbs in his lap and stops pedaling. “Well, I was considering maybe... changing my flight and extending my stay.” He lifts his gaze to mine. “What do you think?”

My heart hammers in my chest and hope rockets through me in a way that leaves me momentarily breathless.

Beau hurries on. “I mean, I’m worried we won’t have wrapped up this case yet, for one thing.” His smile turns shy. “And also, we could use the more time together to maybe figure out”—he waves a hand in the air—“us.”

Something deep and profound settles inside me.

“Aye, beautiful. That’s pure dead brilliant, that is.”

Beau snorts with laughter. “Pure dead brilliant? I bet that means it’s a great idea, right?”

I grin so hard my cheeks hurt. “That’s right.”

Merriment flickers across his face. “Excellent. I’m mighty glad you’re on the same page with me, sugar.”

I unsuccessfully fight back a laugh and then lean over and kiss him before that distracting mouth of his can say another word. When I pull back, he’s got a dazed look in his eyes that fills me with satisfaction. It’s good to know I can get one over on him on occasion. Most of the time, he’s got me happily dancing along to his tune.

“You should stay at mine for the rest of your visit,” I say, not even stopping to ponder what I’m proposing.

Beau’s eyes widen and his grin is downright blinding. “This isn’t just because I rode you to the finish line and blew your mind last night, is it?”

I flush but hold my ground. “That might well have played a small part in my thinking, but even if we don’t do that again, I want to spend as much time with you as I can while you’re here.”

The words come out as sincerely as I mean them, and even I’m a bit startled by how much I want this.

How much I want *him*.

Beau’s eyes are brimming with tenderness. “It would be my honor to stay with you, sir. Thank you kindly.”

A knot of worry in my gut that I hadn’t even noticed loosens and an unexpected warmth rushes through me. Having Beau with me every day and night for however much longer we have together in London brings with it a profound relief and contentment.

The old me, the Callum Fraser before the accident, would have turned tail and run in the face of my growing feelings for Beau. That Callum would have seen them as an unnecessary distraction from work, from more important priorities. I'm self-aware enough now to admit that.

If the accident had never happened, and if I'd never been able to see ghosts, Beau and I probably never would have crossed paths, and for the first time, I think that maybe the accident wasn't all bad. Hell, I'm starting to believe that the pain and suffering were actually worth it because it somehow brought Beau Montgomery into my life. And more and more, I don't ever want to let him go.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Are you taking care of your mental health? This is an important issue for everyone, but I want to emphasize this for folks in our community.

Some of the subjects we cover and situations we encounter can be emotionally complex. Most supernatural phenomena has a connection to death, and the living tend to have a complicated relationship with that subject. Many of us have experienced loss and grief, but we also have our own fears about when we too must meet our end. Knowing that there's more once we've left the land of the living can inspire hope and offer reassurance. Even if we don't have all the answers, there's still something for us to hold on to.

But while we may find the supernatural comforting, others can be disturbed by it. They may steer clear of us the moment we start discussing ghosts, the afterlife, and everything in between! So make sure you're taking care of yourself and don't let the haters get you down. Love and hugs, friends.

—Beau's Boos and Beyond, Episode 70

BEAU

"I have good news and I have bad news," Liz says over the speakerphone the next morning.

Callum and I huddle together at his kitchen bar as we listen, still in our pajamas after a long night of... mutually pleasurable exertions, so to speak.

"Lay it on us, Liz," I tell her.

I'm honored she wants me to use her nickname. We're going to be good friends someday, I can feel it.

"Well, Reggie, aka Reginald Grant, died in 1999, so I'm afraid that's a bit of a dead end—no pun intended."

"Fuck. And the good news then?" Callum asks.

"I was able to track down Owen Grant."

"Huzzah!" I cry, giving Callum a high five, which he returns with an amused look.

"Owen Grant did move away with his uncle in 1980, soon after the fire investigation was closed. To Birmingham, it seems. But he moved back to London at some point and is a charity officer at a youth shelter in Soho. Not that far from Salon de Spin, actually."

"Sonofabitch," Callum curses.

"Simmer down," Liz chides. "He changed his name. Goes by Nigel Townsend now."

She rattles off some more details, and Callum scribbles them down in his Detective Inspector Notebook, as I now call it.

In our modern age, I genuinely respect Callum's preference for the more traditional methods. Sure, he still types up his notes later, but that little book is full of important information insights and is seriously helpful when we're on the move in London.

"Thanks, Liz. This is a huge help."

"Have you found out any more on your end?" Liz asks.

Callum updates her on our conversation with Gloria Tate, the only survivor we were able to track down.

"If anyone else made it out of the building, we weren't able to find them or they weren't mentioned in the original report," I say.

"Worse still," Callum adds, "I've learned that the original arson inspector for the case died more than ten years ago. I *really* wanted to talk to him," he grumbles.

He'd cursed for about three minutes straight after he discovered that yesterday evening. I found some pleasurable ways to take his mind off the disappointment.

“I know that tone,” Liz says, a warning note in her voice. “You’re probably thinking of contacting his family, and I’m telling you right now that you better not dare. If anyone’s going to talk with them, it’ll be in an official context if the case is reopened. Understood?”

Callum crosses his arms over his chest and scowls but grits out, “Fine.”

“Lucky for you, I’ve got a senior contact over at the Fire Brigade. I’ll reach out to her personally and let her know we’re looking back into this old case and want to speak with anyone involved who might still be around.”

“You’re definitely going to ruffle some feathers with that,” Callum says.

“Isn’t that always the way of it?” Liz huffs. “But Margaret has real integrity and is supremely professional. If there’s any whiff of corruption, she won’t try to sweep it under the rug, even with an older case like this. She’s quite honestly our best hope of getting some more intel from that perspective,” Liz admits.

“You’re going out on a limb for me here and I really appreciate it, Liz. There’s definitely something not right about all of this. And six people died. I don’t care how long it’s been, they and their families deserve justice if that fire was no accident.”

“I’m right there with you,” Liz agrees. “We still don’t have enough for me to go to my superiors quite yet, but I’m hoping whatever Margaret can come through with might tip the scales. For now, you should go talk to the nightclub owner’s nephew and see what he has to say. But watch yourself. Remember this isn’t an official police investigation. I don’t want you going off half-cocked because you’ve got a hunch. I know how you can get.”

“We’ll do some research on him first and make a plan, then tweak our cover story if necessary,” I offer. “I’m not sure our current angle will work with him.”

“Hmm,” Callum murmurs. “It might though. He works at a youth shelter. A lot of the kids who find their way to those are LGBTQ+. The people who died in that fire were also young and some of them were at risk the same as kids today.”

“I hadn’t considered it from that perspective,” I reply.

Liz snickers. “I’m sure you two will figure it out. Just don’t get the cops called on you.”

“We’ll be fine,” Callum says, pointing at the phone and mouthing at me, *Mum Voice*.

I try not to laugh.

"All right. I'll touch base again as soon as I've heard back from Margaret, but it may be a day or two."

"Ta," Callum says. "We've got some stuff to follow up on our end."

"We'll be keeping busy *and* going on dates," I add cheerfully.

Liz coughs out a laugh. "So, is this... thing between you two official now? You're *together* together?"

I reach over and take Callum's big, warm hand in mine, lacing our fingers together. "That's right, honey. He and I are like two peas in a pod."

Callum's cheeks flush, but the corners of his mouth curve up in a faint smile.

A-dorable!

"Oh, thank Christ for that," Liz says in a rush. "Maybe getting laid on a regular basis will mellow some of that grump out of him."

"Hey, now," I protest amiably. "I happen to like his grumpy side, but I will say I'm quite proud of myself. I've managed to put a smile on his face several times recently."

"O-ho!" Liz crows. "I can't wait to see that. We definitely need to meet up again soon." She hesitates. "When are you heading home?"

I clear my throat. "Well, I was *supposed* to leave next Tuesday, but I've already changed my ticket, so my departure won't be until the end of this month."

"That'll give us a couple of weeks to figure out where we go from here, romantically speaking," Callum adds.

"Brilliant! With Beau in the picture, I might actually be able to get you over to my place for dinner one night."

"Ooh! I would *love* if we could come over. I've been wanting to meet your husband and your two adorable daughters," I gush. "Tell us when and where."

We immediately make plans for dinner in a couple of days while Callum leans back in his chair and rubs a hand over his face, shaking his head. But I can see the faint hint of a smile curving up the corners of his lips again. With me at his side, I think he'll be just hunky dory.

We wrap up with Liz soon after and Callum ends the call.

He eyes me speculatively. "Am I to assume that you're going to be the one in charge of our social calendar in this relationship?"

My heart does a happy little pitter-patter at him using the magical R-word to describe us.

“For the time being. Otherwise, your more antisocial predilections will put a damper on me getting to know folks. Besides, it’ll be good for you too. You need friends besides little old me. Don’t get me wrong; I’m incredibly fabulous, but we cannot be all things to each other. It’s important that we have other people in your life, and Liz is one of those people you need to restrengthen your previous connection with.”

He sighs. “Aye, you’re right. It’s like I waited too long and now I don’t know where to start.”

“I’ll help you, darlin’,” I say. “It’s never going to be quite the same between you two, but you trust one another and can rely on each other when the going gets tough, and that’s more precious than gold, honey. Trust me on that. As you know, folks like us, with the abilities we have, can find it mighty hard to keep close connections with other people.”

He studies me for a moment. “Do you have someone like Liz in Alabama?”

I smile, but it’s tinged with sadness. “Wish I could say I do, but I’m afraid not. I’ve always had The Gift, and while I played with some children when I was young—children can often be far more open-minded about these things—as I got older, I was ostracized by most of my peers. Ordinary folks stayed away from the spooky kid.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, his eyes reflecting clear sympathy.

I shrug. “It didn’t get a whole lot better when I went away to college either. Of course, it probably didn’t help that I was a commuter student, still living at home with Mama. Maybe if I’d lived in the dorms and been more involved in social clubs and activities, I could have established closer ties, but at that time, I felt like I really needed to be there to help Mama. She was still struggling because of the lupus, and I wanted to be sure I was close by in case of any emergencies.”

“You’re a good son,” Callum says. “She’s lucky to have you.”

“I’m the lucky one. She’s always been my anchor, the only person I can truly rely on.” I lift my gaze to his again. “Until you.”

There’s a moment of loaded silence and then Callum pulls me into his arms and kisses me.

Good golly, Miz Dolly, how I love that feeling! I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of kissing Callum Fraser.

I'll admit, I've always liked locking lips with a handsome man, but with Callum, I experience it with my whole body and soul somehow, like some kind of sixth sense is telling me he's the one, my person, my sweetheart, my other half. We haven't said I love you yet, but I know it's coming. On my side, at least. I've been holding back because I fear spooking poor Callum if I say it too soon. I've fallen hard and fast for the grumpy but gentle Scotsman, and I suspect he feels the same about me but isn't quite ready to admit it yet.

So I'm not gonna push. No doubt I'll hit a point when I won't be able to hold back anymore, but the longer I have to help Callum get accustomed to being with me and experiencing the intimacy of our bond, the better.

The first important step in that direction was changing my return date back home. After our pedal boat adventure, which involved quite a bit more making out until we were worried we might get ourselves in trouble, we celebrated back at his place, where I had a second-go at a bedroom rodeo queen blue ribbon, if you will.

Afterward, when we were sharing a Chinese takeout in bed, I contacted the airline to change my ticket. Then I called Miz Edna about ending my stay at her B&B early. She was very accommodating, even offered to refund some of the money I'd already paid for those few extra nights, but I waved it off. It was money I could afford to spare, and Miz Edna would no doubt put it to good use. She gave us both heartfelt well wishes when we went around to pick up my things this morning and I made sure to have Callum take a Polaroid of us for my scrapbook.

After Callum had gone to take my suitcase outside, she hugged me and thanked me once again for helping her son move on. I quietly told her that I'd be sure to come back and visit if things work out the way I'm hoping they will. She was pleased as punch when I told her that.

"Let me put the kettle on," Callum says now. "Do you fancy a cuppa?"

I smile at him. "I'll take some coffee if you've got it, but I'm afraid y'all haven't turned me into a convert of British tea quite yet. I still prefer coffee."

Callum shakes his head in mock disbelief. "Now that's a real tragedy! You just haven't learned to truly appreciate the power of a good cup of tea."

"If you say so, sugar."

But I'm pleased when he pulls out a French press to make coffee for me.

We're sitting down with our drinks and Callum's so-called *biscuits* when my phone starts ringing and I pull it out. I grin at the screen and then swipe to answer.

"Hello, Mama."

"Hi, sugar. How are you doing today?"

"Fine as can be." I put her on speakerphone and glance at Callum. "I put you on speakerphone, Mama. I'm sitting here with Callum and having a cup of coffee."

"Hello again, Callum. That sounds lovely. And how are things going with your investigation?"

I take a few minutes to fill her in, then she clears her throat. "I wanted to ask, Beau, am I still picking you up at the airport next Tuesday?"

I may have *The Gift*, but I swear Mama has a sixth sense of her own when it comes to me.

I wince and clear my throat awkwardly. "About that, Mama... I've decided to extend my stay and changed my plane ticket to the end of the month."

There's a long silence.

"And when did you decide this?"

"Last night," I confess sheepishly.

"And you didn't think to tell me until now?"

The maternal outrage in her voice is palpable.

"I've been real busy, Mama, and you know how the time zone difference can get a bit tricky. But I was planning to call you later today and let you know—you just beat me to the punch."

She huffs. "Beauregard Jeremiah Montgomery, you're a smooth talker, and you always have been. You get that from your daddy, God love him, but I can see through you every single time."

"Yes, Mama."

A well-brought-up Southern boy knows not to sass his mama.

"Put me on the video chat," she orders.

I glance at Callum and he shrugs but nods.

I switch over to the video function, and Mama's face appears on-screen. The sight of her is immediately comforting, and I'm glad to see she's looking well. She had me rather young, so she's only fifty-one, and still beautiful. Her wavy blond hair has shots of silvery gray through it and falls

down to her shoulders, and right now her hazel eyes smile warmly at me from below wispy bangs.

“Point me so I can see Callum better. I know what your face looks like.”

I pout a little and turn the phone camera to face Callum.

She inhales sharply and whistles. “My, my, my. Beau sure does have good taste in men. He got that from me, by the way. You’re a handsome one, aren’t you, Callum Fraser?”

He flushes a little and I preen.

“My mama didn’t raise me to be a fool, now did she? I know a good thing when I find it.”

She chuckles and bats her eyelashes at Callum. “It’s a pleasure to meet you face-to-face. On-screen, that is.”

Callum shifts a little awkwardly in his chair. “It’s lovely to see your face too, Sarah Jane. I can tell where Beau gets his good looks.”

Mama fluffs her hair and blushes. “Oh, you sweet talker, you! I like this one,” she tells me.

Me too, I think quietly to myself. *A whole darn lot*.

She blinks her eyes a couple times. “Now, the ever-important question, Beau.”

I take a sip of my coffee and brace myself. “What?”

She grins. “Have you had a chance to see him in a kilt yet?”

I promptly choke on my coffee. “Mama!”

She tilts her head at Callum. “Please tell me you have a kilt. I will be very disappointed if you tell me otherwise.”

Callum grins. “I do have a kilt, yes, but I haven’t worn it in a long time. It’s back home with my parents.”

“Well now,” Mama drawls teasingly, “you’re maybe gonna have to bring Beau for a trip up there so he can see you in it—and get some pictures for me.”

Callum looks at me wide-eyed, not sure what to say.

I chuckle. “I’ll see what I can do, Mama.”

She narrows her eyes at us. “If you’ve decided to extend your stay, I’m assuming that means that you two are getting serious. Am I right?”

I glance at Callum and nod, and he follows suit.

Phew!

“That’s right, Mama. We’re still figuring some things out, but I have no intention of quitting before we’ve barely even begun.”

“What about you?” Mama asks Callum, her eyes laser-focused on him. “Do you feel the same way?”

Way to put the pressure on, Mama.

To my surprise, Callum smiles. “I don’t know how we’ll make this work exactly, but there’s something special between us that neither of us is ready to give up on quite yet.”

Mama nods her head in satisfaction. “Good answer.” She can be no nonsense and fiercely protective when it comes to me.

Her expression softens as she studies Callum. “I want you to understand that my son is one of the most beautiful souls you’ll ever meet in this world. I know I may be biased as his mother, but Beau has always been special. Even though my family calls it The Gift, the abilities that he was born with can often be a large burden to bear. Many have misunderstood and judged him because he’s different.” She fights back tears. “People he’s helped communicate with loved ones who’ve passed have sometimes been quick to distance themselves from him when his work was done. It’s made it hard for Beau to find people who genuinely see him and appreciate him for the wonderful, bright, shining star that he is.”

I feel my cheeks warm and tears fill my eyes. “Oh, Mama,” I whisper.

She snuffles and smiles brightly. “Callum, I hope *you* see Beau for who he is and value just how precious he is.”

Callum clears his throat, looking awkward but determined. “I’ve never met anyone quite like your son. And after what happened to me, I probably know better than anyone besides you how special he is. He’s changed my outlook on everything in such a short span of time. I thought my life was over after I lost the job that was my whole world and friends and colleagues who couldn’t believe in my abilities. Beau’s shown me another path forward, a way to make use of these unconventional abilities in a positive way.” He swallows thickly. “I’m not sure I would have figured that out on my own, and I owe him a great deal for that. I already admire and appreciate him more than I’m sometimes able to put into words. I swear that I’ll do my very best to treat him the way he deserves.”

Be still my heart, that almost sounded like wedding vows.

Staying longer is already bringing in rewards aplenty. Hallelujah, honey!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



RULE # 191: IF YOU FIND A NECRONOMICON, DO NOT OPEN IT!

We are not entirely certain this grimoire actually exists. Frankly, we hope it does not. But if you happen to encounter a suspiciously ancient tome bearing the name, please exercise extreme caution and, if possible, flee the area immediately.

From HP Lovecraft to the Evil Dead franchise, virtually every known representation of people coming in contact with this gruesome Book of the Dead ends badly. Not “Oops, I spilled tea on the carpet” badly. Think more along the lines of “Unimaginable horrors have entered this world from another” badly.

In other words, get the hell away from it.

We understand the temptation. Ancient forbidden book? Strange and mysterious symbols? Hidden knowledge beyond our imagining? Sure, it sounds intriguing. Maybe even alluring.

Remember, you are a Spirit Extraction Specialist, not a librarian for the damned. Don’t even think about reading it. And for heaven’s sake, do not bring it home.

For further information, see Rule #222: What Not to Bring Home from a Haunting.

*—ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines
(Revised Edition)*

CALLUM

After we get done talking with Beau's mum, we look up Owen Grant, now known as Nigel Townsend, on the website for the homeless center where he works and call to confirm he is in the office today.

"I think we should keep our cover story as close to the truth as possible," I say as we make our way through Soho holding hands. "We'll keep the supernatural side of it quiet, of course, but we'll tell him we're looking into an old case involving a fire at the Midnight Vault."

Beau's eyes widen. "Not beating around the bush, huh. Doesn't that seem a little bit dicey? He might decide to give us the boot straight away."

"That's possible, but I want to see his reaction when we bring it up without any warning. Surprising him with the information can reveal a lot. Besides, reopening the case is really going to come down to the Fire Brigade contact that Liz reached out to. Even if Owe—I mean *Nigel* divulges anything at this time, it won't hold up in a court of law."

Beau squeezes my hand as we walk.

"I hear what you're saying, but how do you feel about that? I mean, once they reopen the investigation, which I'm confident will happen, it'll be out of our hands."

"It'll be turned over to the proper officials, who'll pursue many of the avenues we already have. All we've done is provide a reason to do so. It'll be up to them to regather the evidence in a way that makes it hold up in court. That's partly why I'm willing to gamble more with Nigel and lay our cards on the table."

Beau looks at me curiously. "Why else?"

Trust Beau to see I may have another reason for my approach. I collect my thoughts for a moment. "If he was involved, he was a minor at the time, which affects legal culpability. He might have been coerced or pressured

into doing something, which would be hard to disprove now if he chooses to claim it.”

“But if he was the one who entered the building and rescued Gloria and possibly some other people, that suggests that he was maybe trying to help,” Beau offers.

“That’s possible, yes. But what really stands out to me is that he not only changed his name, but he’s also been working with nonprofit organizations serving those in need in the area for nearly thirty years.”

Beau lets out a quiet squeal. “Ah! You’re thinking that he’s chosen this career as some kind of penance or something.”

I shrug. “I can’t say for sure, but there are a variety of reasons people go into that line of work, and penance is certainly one of them.”

“Maybe he found religion?”

“Possible. But my gut instinct doesn’t buy that.”

“Why not?”

“Remember how Gloria still has nightmares about that night and had survivor’s guilt for a very long time?”

“You think Nigel might be haunted by what happened too?”

“I’d think so. If he saw that building go up in flames, I’m sure it must have been traumatizing unless he’s a fucking sociopath. I’m pretty certain he was there, though, and he may know who was responsible for the fire if he wasn’t.”

“Are you thinking his uncle for this?”

I nod. “He’s the most likely suspect on our list right now.”

Beau considers this, then smiles. “Okay, we’ll do it your way. Let’s see what kind of reaction we get.”

A short time later, we arrive at the shelter and ask to speak with Nigel Townsend. After about fifteen minutes, an older man with thinning gray hair and a slim build comes out to greet us. He’s wearing a dress shirt with a knitted jumper over it and a pair of gray wool trousers.

“What can I do for you, gentlemen?”

“We were hoping we could talk with you in your office. We’ll try not to take up too much of your time.”

He frowns at me. “What’s this about?”

“That’s something we’d prefer to speak with you about *in private*,” Beau says, glancing toward the curious receptionist meaningfully.

The man hesitates for a long moment and then gives us a tight smile, gesturing for us to follow him down a hall where a handful of administrative offices reside. He leads us to a door toward the end, which he opens.

He waits for us to enter, then closes the door and makes his way to a chair behind an old wooden desk covered with documents in loose piles. The room itself is bare bones. Water stains mark the ceiling, and the furniture looks to be secondhand, including Nigel's desk. The artificial overhead lighting in the room casts a sallow hue over everything.

We sit in two chairs facing his desk and I pull out my notepad.

"Thank you for taking the time to meet with us. My colleague and I here are working on a podcast episode exploring some of the history of this area."

He frowns. "You mean the shelter?"

I shake my head. "No, actually, an old Victorian textile warehouse that held a nightclub called the Midnight Vault on its ground floor in the seventies. The nightclub part was destroyed by a fire back in 1979."

Confusion freezes on his face and I stare at him unblinkingly.

Nigel's right eye twitches and he gives us a tight-lipped smile. "That was a long time ago," he manages to say.

"Indeed. But it's an unusual case that didn't seem to get a lot of official attention even though six people died in the fire."

He swallows and a bead of sweat forms at his temple.

"And why are you wanting to speak with me?"

I lean closer. "We're interested in learning more about your uncle, Reggie Grant."

His face blanches.

"We know he was the owner of the nightclub from speaking with Ken Armstrong, one of the former bouncers for the club. That's how we learned about you. You were called Owen Grant at that time."

He pulls out a handkerchief and starts mopping his brow, his hand trembling slightly.

"How did you find me?" he asks.

"You'd be surprised what you can learn on the internet with some thorough searching in the appropriate databases. We know you and your uncle moved away from the city for a while after the fire and then you came back after you changed your name." I lean back in my chair. "We'd

appreciate learning more about your uncle and the club to help with our episode.”

Nigel eyes the door. “I don’t really feel comfortable talking about that here.”

Now it’s Beau’s turn, just like we planned.

“Why don’t you meet us this evening after you get off work?” He hands over a slip of paper that has Salon de Spin and its address written out.

“Or we could always meet at your home,” I say with a smile. “Maybe your family has more insights.”

He pales even more. “N-no, that’s quite all right. I’ll meet you at this address.” He takes the paper reluctantly.

Deciding not to push our luck, I get to my feet and Beau follows me. “We’ll meet you at six o’clock.”

We leave a clearly anxious Nigel behind as we head out.

“You don’t think he’s gonna pull a runner, do you?” Beau asks. “It’s clear we definitely surprised him. He wasn’t too keen to hear us bring up his uncle or the club.”

I give him a tight smile. “Well, I played a bit dirty when I suggested I might speak with his family. If he doesn’t want them involved, he’ll have to come see us alone.”

Beau’s eyes widen. “So that’s why you said that. Well played, sir.”

I wince. “It wasn’t very kind, but I had a strong inkling that he doesn’t want them to know anything about this.”

“Well, if he shows up tonight, then you’ll most certainly be right about that.”

“My hunches are usually pretty good. Granted, I haven’t exactly been in top form for the last few years, but certain instincts never fully go away.”

Beau grins at me. “I love it when you get all detective inspector-y on me. It’s so sexy.”

I pull him into my side and wrap my arm around his waist, holding him close as we walk.

“If he comes to the studio, do you think your end of the plan is going to work?” I ask.

Beau beams with confidence. “If he knows something and our friends there listen in on the discussion, I’m sure they’re going to have their own two cents to add. If that’s the case, they may want to make their presence known.”

“Are you thinking about acting as their conduit again?” I ask, narrowing my eyes.

He gives me an innocent look, all wide-eyed and far too damned attractive.

“I won’t rule it out, sugar. After all, my top priority here is helping those poor souls move on. If we can get some answers from Nigel, that will give them the closure they need to move on, and that’s enough for me, even if the case isn’t reopened. Will it be enough for you?”

That’s a loaded question.

I frown. “I’m not sure. I’ll admit, I’d like to see the case reopened through the proper channels and done by the book, but that also doesn’t mean a whole lot if it doesn’t help those spirits.”

Beau pats my arm around his waist. “Exactly. You’re not in that law enforcement world anymore, but you’re still on the side of the victims. Now, though, they need you and me to help them let go of whatever regret, resentment, or vengefulness they are harboring.”

I lean down and kiss the top of his head. “I still believe the law needs to be upheld, no matter how old the case is, but you’ve opened my eyes to the fact that the best justice for these spirits is helping them leave this world and be at peace.”

“See, Callum Fraser, you *can* teach an old dog new tricks,” he says with a cheeky grin.

I immediately poke him in the side where I’ve discovered he’s ticklish and he starts laughing, trying to squirm away.

“And I’m not that old,” I grumble.

But his words do cause a niggle of doubt. I’d been so fixated on the distance issue in trying to have a relationship that I hadn’t considered our age difference. Thirteen years isn’t outrageous, but it could pose challenges if we get serious enough for a permanent commitment. Do we even want the same things in life?

Hell, I’m not sure I even know what I want. I’ve been existing in limbo for the past few years and am only now starting to really live again. Some difficult conversations hover on the horizon, but I force myself to focus back on our case for now.

A few hours later, we’re getting ready to head out to the studio. We want to get set up ahead of time so we’re ready for when Nigel shows up. I’m fairly confident the threat of talking to his family has spooked him enough

that he'll almost certainly show. I'm still not proud of that move, but we need answers, and the sooner the better.

All of a sudden, my phone rings and I pull it out of my jacket pocket. Liz's name pops up on the screen.

She wouldn't be calling me back so fast if there wasn't a new development. "What have you found out?"

"I spoke with Margaret this morning, and she promised to look into it. I thought we'd have to wait a couple days, but she rang me back a few minutes ago. It seems this former arson investigator popped up red flags pretty damn fast when she started digging. Apparently, he was quietly forced to take early retirement back in 2000 after someone reported him for taking bribes in what would be his final investigation."

"Holy shit!" I breathe.

"Exactly," she says, her tone grim. "From what Margaret's uncovered, the commissioner at the time tried to keep things quiet. Since he was able to get the man to retire early, he managed to avoid additional review of the investigator's previous cases."

"What a clusterfuck."

"No shit. Margaret's forcing an audit of all the cases that investigator worked on over the years, not just yours."

I whistle at that. "You were right about Margaret. She doesn't mess about, does she?"

Liz chuckles. "She has no qualms about pissing off other people, that's for sure. Professional accountability and transparency are of the utmost importance with her. Protecting the reputation of a former member of the fire brigade engaged in corrupt practices isn't something she'd stand for."

"Won't that create some hostility in the ranks, especially among any old-timers who worked with the guy?"

"No doubt. But this is going to become a massive internal review, and Margaret will be bringing in external examiners to ensure that everything's on the up and up. Given that a past commissioner was involved too, we might be talking more than one external entity getting involved. The papers will have a field day."

I'm not surprised about that.

"So now we're in the hurry-up-and-wait phase," I say with a chuckle.

There's a beat of silence. "You're calmer about this than I expected, but you're right. There won't be any developments anytime soon with your

specific case, but Margaret is already assembling a team to get underway. She's not wasting time."

I'm strangely elated, but it's also a somewhat hollow victory. I'm going to have to let go of the case once it's reopened. For that very reason, I decide to hold off on telling Liz that we're meeting with Nigel this evening. There are things Beau and I need to know now that can't wait.

When we hang up, Beau pulls me into a hug, wrapping his arms around me.

"We did it," he says.

I make a noise of agreement.

Beau pulls back and searches my face. "I know you won't be able to be part of the official inquiry anymore, but you played a pivotal role in making this happen. Be proud of that. If the haunting at Salon de Spin had never been taken seriously by the two of us together, those spirits would never have had anyone to help them. Their story would have remained buried and forgotten."

"You're right," I say, brushing the hair from his forehead and kissing him there. "But I still intend to get as much information out of Nigel as I can."

Beau grins. "I'm right there with you, partner."

I like the sound of that for more reasons than I'm ready to admit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Departure day is almost here, friends! It's all starting to feel very real, and I'll admit, I'm equal parts nervous and excited. I've only ever been on an airplane a handful of times and never to go someplace across the ocean.

A while back, before the pandemic, Mama and I flew to Las Vegas so we could see Sir Elton John when he had a residency at The Colosseum in Caesar's Palace. Talk about a gay pilgrimage! It was a memorable trip, but nothing like what I'm about to undertake.

This will also be my first time traveling alone. I have no trouble entertaining myself, but I do hope I meet some interesting folks in London who will be happy to show me around. I'm bringing along a whole box of individually wrapped Priester's Pralines—an Alabama classic—to give out as thank-you gifts to any kind strangers I meet. After all, my mama raised me right, and I know how to show my gratitude and appreciation toward others—and what better way than to share a little taste of home with them?

—Beau's Boos and Beyond, Episode 75

BEAU

"Isn't this place closed?" Nigel asks, looking at the darkened spin studio building with wide eyes.

I smile. “We have a key and permission to use this space for some of our work. Callum here works for the business owner.”

We’re fudging the truth a smidge, but it’s mostly true.

I can tell that Nigel Townsend really doesn’t want to go inside, but he musters his resolve and follows us despite his obvious trepidation. Not that I blame him. If some strangers were trying to bring me into a locked building after dark, I’d be hightailing it the other way.

But it seems that Callum’s threat of speaking with his family has overridden any reservations he might have about joining us. While I sympathize with whatever trauma little Owen Grant might have experienced from the fire that Nigel Townsend then carried into adulthood, my top priority is helping the folks who died. They deserve to be able to leave the limbo they’re in and not suffer anymore.

I pull out a wrapped praline and offer it to him. “Would you like a little sweet treat? This is a specialty from Alabama, where I’m from.”

He looks at me like I’m out of my mind and shakes his head. “Erm... no thank you.”

These Brits are so polite, even when they think you’re bonkers.

I shrug and open the packet, popping the praline in my mouth and munching away happily. Priester’s Pralines have always been one of my favorite treats. I suppose it’s a good thing that I’m running low on the box I brought with me. I’ve met so many kind and wonderful folks here that I’ve had the opportunity to thank.

I’ve also made Callum a convert, and I’m already thinking about ways I can mail him a little care package full of things that are special to me, give him a little taste of down-home Alabama while we’re apart.

Although I’m trying not to think too much about having to go home. The time together we’ve gained with my return plane ticket change is not a permanent solution, unfortunately.

Callum’s flashlight lights our way as we move down the dark hallway. Nigel relaxes a little bit when he sees the bright lights in the main spin classroom.

We had moved the stationary bikes over to the back wall to free up a bit more space and set up three folding chairs for us to use while we converse. Nigel selects a chair and sits down, wiping his palms against his pant legs and twitches a bit while looking around.

“I haven’t been down this street in a long time.”

“I’m sure the landscape of the area has changed an awful lot since you were here as a boy, but this building we’re in was actually erected on the site where the former nightclub used to be,” Callum says.

Nigel stills.

“This is where the Midnight Vault used to be?” he asks, his voice shaking.

“It surely is,” I say.

“But the street number was different,” he mutters.

“That changed with rezoning a long time ago,” Callum explains. “After the club was torn down, the lot became a car park for a couple of decades, but then the land was sold again and this building went up.”

Nigel gulps. “I see. Is that why you wanted to bring me here, to reminisce about the past?”

Callum holds his notebook at the ready and leans forward in his seat. “Let’s start with your uncle. What can you tell us about Reggie?”

Nigel looks between us, a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. Then he sits back in his chair and crosses his arms in a defensive way.

“Uncle Reggie was... a complicated man. He had his demons, but the worst of them was gambling. Later on, he turned to drink and went downhill from there.” His expression clouds over as he speaks. “That’s what killed him in the end.”

“He was your guardian, right?” I say.

Nigel shifts uncomfortably in his chair. “That’s right. I never knew my father. The wanker fucked off when my mum told him she was pregnant. She raised me as a single parent until she got sick...” His voice trails off and he hunches in on himself. “She passed away when I was ten, and no one else in the extended family wanted to take me in. Uncle Reggie was the only one who stepped up, refusing to let me be put into the foster care system.” His voice softens. “For that, I’ll always owe him a debt of gratitude.”

“What was life like with him?” I ask softly. “Was he a good guardian?”

“For the first couple of years, yeah, things were good. Uncle Reggie set his sights on opening a business and was working on trying to buy the old warehouse, planned to convert it into a nightclub. It took a while for him to get a loan, then he had to file all the paperwork to get approval for the renovations, and then the actual work had to get done. It took nearly two years to get the club finally open. By then, I was thirteen.”

“From your recollection, how did the club do financially?” Callum asks, his sharp gaze focused on Nigel.

I love when he gets like this. He’s so intense. It kind of makes me want to have him interrogate me. Maybe a little role-play where he plays bad cop and I play naughty criminal...

Nigel hesitates. “I think it did well... at first. It was popular in the area, had lots of young people coming in to drink and dance the night away. Disco was in its heyday, and Reggie really went all in.” His gaze turns inward. “But by the second year, Uncle Reggie started having money problems.”

“Ken told us it was because of his gambling, that he’d gotten himself into debt and was siphoning money from the club’s revenue to cover his losses,” Callum says.

Nigel looks down, shamefaced. “Ken was right. Uncle Reggie changed after that. He was constantly angry and on edge, but he couldn’t seem to keep away from the racetrack. He was always so certain he’d be able to turn his luck around, but instead he got deeper and deeper in debt. It got so bad that some of the staff started threatening to leave. He was getting behind in the bills, payroll started getting late.”

“How did Reggie respond to that?” I ask.

“He mostly shrugged it off. Told them he’d get everything sorted, not to worry. But it was all a front.”

“So what happened the night of the fire?” Callum asks.

The lights in the room flicker, and I sense the presence of our ghostly friends. I had been wondering how long it might be until they made an appearance.

Nigel glances about, wild-eyed. “I-I don’t really know.”

Callum arches an eyebrow. “That’s strange. We spoke with someone who mentioned seeing you in the alley outside the club that night.”

A faint wind rustles through the room. I suspect it’s Big Mike’s doing.

Nigel’s face takes on a sickly cast and his voice breaks. “W-what?”

“Like I said, someone saw you in the alley that night. What were you doing there?”

“No, I-I wasn’t,” he stammers, darting his gaze around as if trying to figure out an escape route.

The temperature in the room plummets and the lights start to flicker violently.

“What is this?” Nigel’s eyes go wide with terror.

Callum keeps going. “We also spoke with Gloria Tate, one of the women who managed to escape. She mentioned a young boy around the age you were at the time who appeared out of nowhere and helped her out of the building. How do you account for that?”

Poor Nigel looks about ready to pass out.

“Why don’t you tell us what happened, honey? You’ve probably been wanting to get this off your chest for a long time, haven’t you?” I offer encouragingly.

“Did your uncle start the fire?” Callum demands.

Nigel makes a noise reminiscent of a wounded animal and slumps forward, face in his hands. “The fire was an accident. The investigator ruled it an accident.” He repeats those words like they’re a lifeline.

“I’m sorry to inform you that the old finding is now in question,” Callum says bluntly.

“What?” He lifts his head, face full of shock.

“We’ve already spoken with higher-ups at both the Met and the London Fire Brigade. It seems the arson investigator for that case has recently come under scrutiny for corrupt behavior during his tenure, including taking bribes. They’re going to reexamine all of his former investigations and reopen any deemed suspicious or faulty in any way.”

A look of sheer panic washes over Nigel, and he jumps to his feet. “I have to leave.”

He hurries to the door but it slams shut in his face, and no matter how hard he yanks on it, he can’t get it to open.

The lights flicker again and then go out.

“What the hell is happening?” he screams.

Big Mike approaches me, and that’s my cue.

I nod my head in consent and allow him to take the wheel, as it were.

“Owen, my boy,” his deep voice says through my body. “It’s Big Mike. I saw you that night, skulking about in the alley. Why were you there, lad? You never used to come to the club at night, let alone after hours.”

Nigel backs away from me, stumbling. “Who the hell are you?”

Big Mike leaves, and I allow Peter to take his place. His voice comes out soft and sad. “We tried to get out of the basement, son, but the door wouldn’t open. Why didn’t you help us?”

Nigel retreats back into the wall and crumples to the ground, trying to put his hands over his ears to block out the sound.

“You’re not real,” he cries. “You’re *dead*.”

Jonathan then takes over, full of righteous anger. “We’ve been stuck here for over fifty years, you bastard! Tell us what happened. Why did we have to die?” The rage and sorrow in his voice is palpable, and my heart once more aches for him and the others.

Nigel starts to cry, running his hands through his thinning hair. “It wasn’t my fault. Uncle Reggie’s the one who planted the incendiaries. I was only responsible for setting them alight after the club closed. I never meant to hurt anyone. I thought the place was empty.”

A chorus of wails that even Callum and Nigel can hear echoes throughout the room, and the floor shakes. That tells me just how strong their collective grief is—it’s given them the strength to manifest their voices to some extent.

“I swear, I didn’t want to hurt anyone,” Nigel cries. “Reggie told me the place would be empty. I even waited an hour after closing, but there was no sign of any activity.”

“But why even start the fire in the first place?” Callum asks. “What did Reggie want?”

We already have a pretty clear notion about that but we need Nigel to confirm it.

Nigel covers his face with his hands again. “The money.”

“What money?” Callum presses.

“The insurance money. Reggie told me it was the only way we could get ourselves out of debt and start over. I was a stupid kid. I believed him, and he told me I owed it to him to help when he asked me.” He buries his face in his hands. “He’d taken me in when no one else would, and he was all I had. I thought he might abandon me if I said no.”

I shake my head sadly. Nigel’s not a bad guy. He was a vulnerable kid who got exploited by the adult who should have been protecting him.

“I didn’t know anyone was inside until two people came running out the side door,” Nigel whispers, pain evident in his voice. “I didn’t think, I just ran inside, trying to find anyone I could. The last girl I helped out told me there were still people in the basement.”

“Gloria?” Callum confirms.

He nods. “She was Archie’s friend.”

“You knew some of the people who were in the basement?” I ask.

“Not well, except for Peter. I helped Reggie with some of the daytime tasks for the club, and Peter would sometimes come by if he needed to talk to my uncle about the business,” Nigel says, sniffing.

“Did you know that Peter used the basement with friends after hours?” Callum asks.

Nigel shakes his head. “No, no. I only found out... after. There was no way for me to know anyone was down there. The space didn’t have any windows.”

“What happened after Gloria told you more people were inside?” Callum asks.

Nigel starts to cry again, long, wracking sobs now. “The fire was getting out of control. It grew so much faster than I expected. I did try again though. We hadn’t renovated the upper floors of the building, and right after I went back inside, a big wooden beam from above came crashing down and blocked the door to the basement. I spent what felt like ages trying to move it out of the way, but it wouldn’t budge. The thing was massive.” His eyes become haunted. “I could hear people on the other side, crying out and trying to open the door. But they couldn’t, and I couldn’t help them either. Eventually, I could hardly breathe. The smoke was so thick and the heat was unreal.” He slumps forward in defeat. “I gave up and turned tail and ran. By then, the fire brigade was arriving. I got to them as fast as I could and told them there were still people trapped inside the basement, but the fire inside was raging out of control and they couldn’t attempt a rescue. Instead, they had to focus on containing the blaze so it didn’t spread to the other buildings nearby. They looked for another way to access the basement for ages, but there wasn’t one. There was no way to save those six people who were trapped.” He looks up, tears streaming down his face, complete and utter defeat written all over him. “I’ve kept this secret for so long. There isn’t a day that goes by that I’m not tormented by the memory and my guilt for the part I played in it all. I didn’t set out to kill anyone, but I’m just as responsible as my uncle was.”

“Did he know there were people in the basement that night?” Callum asks.

Nigel wipes at his face with his arm. “No, at least I don’t think so. When I left the scene and went running back home to tell him what had

happened, he was genuinely shocked. Peter hadn't told him he'd be using the basement that night, so I guess he assumed the club would be empty."

I glance at Peter, who looks at me with a sad expression but doesn't say anything.

"But you and Reggie never went to the police to tell them what had happened," Callum says.

Nigel shakes his head miserably. "I wanted to. But once Uncle Reggie got over the shock, he turned downright scary. He told me to keep my bloody mouth shut or he'd have to kill me too. I believed him. He may have been my uncle, and I loved him, but when push came to shove, I knew he'd always prioritize saving his own skin over anyone else's."

"You were still a child," I tell him. "Your uncle shouldn't have put you in that situation to begin with."

Nigel gives a bitter laugh. "No, he shouldn't have. I know that now. But I still chose to help him, and that's on me. I've spent most of my life trying to give back in every way I can to help those in need. I know it can never make up for what I did, but I couldn't sit back and do nothing."

"Do you know what happened between your uncle and the arson investigator?" Callum asks. "This is probably going to come out when they reopen the case."

Nigel deflates even further. "They were mates from their schooldays. Uncle Reggie promised him half the money from the insurance payout if he deemed the cause of the fire an accident. He also got rid of any witness statements involving me."

"Bloody hell," Callum says.

"It was a tense few weeks, but once the investigation closed, things settled down for a while," Nigel explains. "A month later, the insurance payout came through. Uncle Reggie paid off the arson inspector and used his half to pay off his debts, then moved us to Birmingham. We even changed our names because he wanted a fresh start, like erasing everything that happened."

"And was it?" Callum asks. "A fresh start, I mean."

"At first, yeah. I was in a bad place mentally, tried everything to forget what had happened. But a new life didn't get rid of the guilt. And as for Uncle Reggie, it wasn't long until he slipped back into his old habits. Now though, he didn't have a constant stream of money coming in to gamble with, so he turned to alcohol instead. Before long, he couldn't even hold

down a job anymore. As soon as I finished my O-levels, I got the hell out of there. I couldn't be around him anymore, watching him slowly drink himself to death, and also be reminded of the role we'd both played in the deaths of six people. I still haven't gotten over that, but I've tried to atone in the years since."

The lights flicker back on and the temperature begins to return to normal. Our ghostly friends are standing still and silent across the room from Nigel, watching him. Their anger from earlier is gone and in its place is a sad kind of acceptance.

Callum helps Nigel to his feet.

"What's going to happen now?" Nigel asks in a trembling voice.

Callum shakes his head. "I can't say. We were brought in to investigate the haunting in this building and figure out how to stop it, but now the official investigation of the fire has been handed over to the proper authorities. They'll no doubt be contacting you very soon. If I were you, I'd get my affairs in order."

Nigel bows his head. "Somehow, I always knew this day would come." He gives a sad smile when he looks up again. "It's strangely a huge relief."

"Carrying something like that for so many years takes a toll on the body, mind, and soul," Callum tells him. "I can't say what the Crown Prosecutor's Office will do, but you were underage and coerced by the adult whose care you were in. It's unlikely you'll end up serving any serious time."

"You'll probably be doing yourself a favor if you go in and relate your story to the authorities of your own volition," I offer.

Nigel nods slowly and looks around, clearly still spooked. "This place is really haunted by them, isn't it?"

"Yup."

He gulps. "That was them talking to me... through you?"

"Yes, sir."

He moves closer to Callum, looking at me like I'm some kind of freak. I heave an internal sigh. I'm used to that kind of reaction, but that doesn't mean it doesn't sting whenever I get it.

"I'm what folks would call a ghost whisperer," I explain. "I can converse with ghosts, plus the dead can speak through me if I allow them to."

Nigel swallows convulsively. "Are they still here?" he whispers.

I nod.

He blanches again.

“Is there anything you want to say to them? This might be your only chance,” I tell him.

“Can they... understand me?”

“They can.”

He closes his eyes, exhaustion and regret written all over his face. “I know it doesn’t make up for what happened, but I want to say I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry.”

Callum shepherds Nigel outside to help him call a cab home as he’s clearly in no condition to go there by himself, while I stay behind.

It’s almost time for the six spirits trapped in this building to say goodbye.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



RULE #8: ZOMBIES ARE NOT REAL (PROBABLY)

Zombies, ghouls, the living dead—however you want to describe them, do not exist as far as we know at the time of writing this manual. While such creatures abound in the horror movie genre, we have never come across any in the course of our professional work.

Now, that isn't to say they definitively do not exist. We merely contend that the likelihood is marginal at best.

If you should by some strange circumstance find yourself in the presence of a zombie, we recommend running. If they are indeed flesh-eaters, you don't want them taking a bite out of you. Be aware, however, that there has not been a universal consensus in the slow- vs. fast-moving zombie debate. Your guess is as good as ours whether said undead creature will lumber after you slowly or run you down like a lion chasing down a zebra in the Serengeti.

Either way, using maximum speed is highly recommended.

And if you survive, be sure to document and report the incident at headquarters ASAP.

—*ExorSquad Employee Safety Manual and Operational Guidelines*
(Revised Edition)

CALLUM

When I get back to the spin classroom, our ghostly friends are still waiting there. I frown.

“Was that enough? Do they have closure now, knowing what happened?”

Beau smiles sadly. “They do. It’s almost time for us to say goodbye.”

Even I experience a twinge of sadness at the prospect of saying farewell for good to these guys. In some ways, they are part of my journey to become secure in my abilities. But working on this case, and trying to help these spirits, has also made me rethink my priorities in life—and be grateful that I’m still here and breathing.

Beau walks over to one corner and turns on the stereo system, using his phone to pull up a disco playlist. Jonathan says something to him and Beau smiles.

“Le Freak” by CHIC starts playing and he holds his hand out to me. “Our friends here want a disco dance-off before departing for the great beyond.”

I bark out a laugh. “Really?”

They all nod in time with Beau.

“This was one of Jonathan’s favorite songs, so we’re starting with it,” Beau adds with a wink.

The lights go out and the room slowly morphs into an ethereal disco dance club, complete with multicolored lights in the floor and a spinning mirror ball above us that refracts rainbow specks along the walls. It’s even more grandiose than the last time. I suppose they pulled out all the stops for this finale.

I join an enthusiastic Beau, who’s already moving along to the beat.

“I’m a terrible dancer, as you learned last time,” I remind him. “This is probably going to end up looking a lot less like *Saturday Night Fever* and more like that parody scene in the *Airplane!* movie.”

Beau laughs. “Now *that* I can’t wait to see. But don’t try spinning me around and letting go, okay, darlin’?” He glances over my shoulder. “Besides, Jonathan’s gonna show us how it’s done.”

We watch as the unofficial leader of the spirits moves to the middle of our phantom dance floor and does a disco point, then drops it diagonally toward his opposite hip, which pops in a sassy little side jut. He repeats the movement in time with the music for a while, then slides smoothly right, taps his foot, and glides back to the left. His shoulders roll loosely as he starts some kind of double arm-swing maneuver.

There's no way in fucking hell I'm going to be able to copy any of that.

I grin as Beau follows along, trying to emulate Jonathan's movements as the song transitions to "You Sexy Thing" by Hot Chocolate. He's much better at this than me.

Jonathan moves to Beau's side and they manage to execute a synchronized bump maneuver that has their hips colliding—well, as much as ghost hips can—on the downbeat. The other spirits join the fun, although none of them seem to be quite as talented as Jonathan. That bloke's got moves all right. Nevertheless, everyone's better than my clumsy arse. But I do my best to muddle along, getting into the exuberant spirit of the moment.

For once, all the spirits are smiling and laughing as they dance with us for one last time. It gives me a glimpse into what they must have been like when they were still alive—vivacious and fun, full of energy and a joy for life.

In the face of that, I can't help but feel a bit ashamed of how I've wasted the last five years. But from here on out, I'm going to make the most of what time I have left in this world. I don't want regrets when my final moment comes. When I need to move on to whatever awaits us after death, I don't want anything holding me back. I've seen how painful that can be.

Beau does a hip-swinging little hustle over to me and takes hold of my hands. "Let's have our *Airplane!* moment, darlin'."

That makes me laugh, but I do my best to match his movements as we dance to the beat. No one else could ever get me disco dancing with a bunch of ghosts. That's how amazing Beau Montgomery is—and I want to see him happy and smiling with me forever.

If that isn't love, I don't know what is.

Well, fuuuuuck me.

As I'm trying to recover from this monumental epiphany, Jonathan starts dancing around us, flinging his arm up and—

I blink.

He's throwing handfuls of *glitter* in the air.

I hold my arm up and watch the semi-transparent glitter land on my skin, leaving a cold tingle as it disappears.

“Are we getting glitter-bombed by a ghost?” I ask incredulously.

“Hahahahaha!” Beau’s laughing so hard he’s doubled over. He gives Jonathan a thumbs-up. “Nice work, sir.”

I don’t know how long we continue like that, all of us dancing our hearts out. But when the playlist finally comes to an end, the colored phantom floor and mirror ball slowly flicker out of existence.

One by one, the ghosts stop to speak briefly with Beau and several offer me a ghostly pat on the back. Then they too disappear.

Jonathan is the last and spends the longest talking to Beau. By the end, he’s got tears in his eyes. He gives me a wink and an air kiss and is gone.

Beau takes out his beloved pocket watch. “What do you know? Midnight on the dot. Just like Cinderella and her magic pumpkin carriage.”

Then he bursts into tears.

Flustered, I pull him into my arms, not sure what else I can do.

“It’s all right,” I try to reassure him. “We did it. We were able to help them move on. You’ve done a good thing.”

“I know,” he wails, “but I’m still so darn sad. They were such beautiful souls who deserved more. Their lives were cut short far too soon. It’s all stupid and unfair, and I hate it.”

“I know, luv,” I say, pressing kisses into his hair. “But they were grateful, weren’t they? You helped them when no one else could.”

He only sobs even more.

“Please don’t cry, sweetheart.” I don’t like him hurting this much but I don’t know how to fix it for him.

Finally, I do the one thing I know might stop the tears.

I put every ounce of what I feel for him into a fierce kiss. This bright and beautiful man is a gift. He opened the windows of my heart and let light and love in. He gave me hope for the first time since my accident. How in the world can I ever repay him? And do I even deserve someone as amazing as Beau Montgomery?

After several long moments, I pull back, breathing heavily. Beau’s cheeks are rosy and his lips swollen, but the tears have stopped.

“You play dirty, sir,” he chides. “Those lips of yours are a secret weapon.”

I chuckle. “If it can make you feel better, then I have no regrets.”

He pulls a checkered handkerchief that matches his bow tie—naturally—from his pocket and wipes at his face. “I must look a frightful mess right now.”

I cradle his face in my hands. “You always look beautiful to me.”

Red nose, puffy eyes, and all.

“Mama was right. You are a sweet talker, aren’t you?”

“Only when it comes to you, sweetheart.”

He gives me a sly smile. “I might start getting the wrong idea if you keep using all these endearments with me, darlin’.”

“It’s not the wrong idea,” I say, my voice hoarse with emotion.

His eyes widen and he searches my face.

From the start, Beau has always been the one to be brave and bold. Now it’s my turn.

“I’m in love with you,” I blurt out, my heart squeezing in my chest.

Well, it might not be the suavest declaration of all time, but direct is more my style anyway.

For a long, anxiety-inducing moment, he stares at me.

Then he smiles so blindingly bright that he could give the sun a run for its money.

“I was wondering when you’d get around to saying it,” he teases.

“You knew?”

I must be an utter dumbass because *I* only realized it a few seconds ago.

“I wasn’t one hundred percent certain, but yes, I was fairly confident that I wasn’t alone in feeling this way.” He grins. “I am an eternal optimist, you know.”

My heart does something strange in my chest and I’m almost lightheaded.

I gape. “So, does that mean...?”

He rolls his eyes fondly. “Oh, darlin’, I’ve been a goner for you from the start. You’re it for me, Callum Fraser. Heck, I love you more than a basket of Clanton peaches in July.”

I blink a few times. “Erm... That’s good, right?”

“Just you wait until you try one of those peaches. Pure heaven.”

“Glad to know I rank above fruit,” I reply dryly.

Beau snickers. “Trust me, it’s a massive compliment where I come from.”

“This relationship just took a big leap into the commitment zone. What exactly does that mean for us now?” I can’t stop the worry from creeping into my tone.

“Well, sugar, since I’ve been quite a few steps ahead of you this whole time, I’ve already been thinking on this. So you let me know if you’re game for what I’m about to suggest. Oh, and you’re gonna have to help me persuade Mama.”

I’ll do nearly anything to keep Beau at my side.

“Lay it on me, sweetheart.”

He grins. “Well, you see...”

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EPILOGUE

Nine months later...

Edinburgh

BEAU

“I’ve brought you boys some lunch,” Helen says, striding into our brand-new office with a carrier bag full of food. “And you too, Poirot.”

Our unofficial business mascot meows loudly and rubs up against Helen’s leg.

“Welcome, Helen,” I say with a smile, getting to my feet to help her. “Thanks for dropping by.”

She nods. “Good, you’ve finally dropped the *Miz*.”

I give her a sheepish smile. “Yes, ma’am.”

Ever since Callum and I moved to Edinburgh to set up our business and home, his mother has been doing her best to feed us on a daily basis. The moment she first saw me, she clucked her tongue and said, “You’re a looker, you are, but you’re far too thin. We need to get some more meat on those bones so you can handle a Scottish winter.”

Callum returns from the back room and sighs fondly when he sees Helen.

“Mum, you don’t need to keep doing this. We won’t starve to death.”

She waves a hand dismissively. “I like doing it and poor Beau’s still far too thin. Besides, now that I’m retired, I have too much time on my hands. This gives me something to do for my son and his handsome partner.”

My phone starts ringing with a video call, and I answer.

“Mama, what great timing. I’m here with Callum and his mother.”

“Oh! Pass the phone to Helen, honey. She and I need to talk.”

Obediently, I give Helen the phone, and she and Mama start gabbing away like long-lost sisters.

Nine months ago, when I finally had to go home, Callum ended up coming with me. I needed his moral support to help me tell Mama my grandiose plan of moving with Callum back to Scotland and setting up our very own supernatural private investigation agency. After partnering with Callum on the haunted spin studio case, I knew the two of us worked well together. With our abilities and Callum's detective skills, our business could cover regular hauntings and spirits needing guidance to the other side as well as other phenomena.

Callum had been hesitant about the idea at first, but the more we talked, the more excited he became. I knew how much the Salon de Spin case had rekindled his investigative spirit, and as I told Liz when we went over the plan with her and Doug, it would have been a travesty to let that energy go to waste when we could be helping so many people. She wholeheartedly agreed.

And honestly, I was relieved when Callum had a solid excuse to hand in his notice with ExorSquad. That place was shady as heck, and when we started hearing rumors about some of their employees dying, I didn't want my man tied to them any longer. Callum couldn't reach anyone at the company by that point, so in the end he left Gerald a curt voicemail tendering his resignation, then blocked him at my insistence.

Then we were all set to get started on our new business, and life, together.

I had dreaded telling Mama though. Moving so far away was going to be hard on us both. But I shouldn't have doubted her. When she saw how Callum treats me and how gaga we are for each other, she gave her blessing without reservation.

"This works out perfectly," she'd said. "I've been wanting to do some more traveling with Doreen. We've already let you book that cruise for us in February like you wanted—thank you so much from both of us—and we're planning some other trips together too. It's high time we both saw more of the world, baby."

I'd worried because for so long it had just been the two of us. I didn't want to leave her all alone. But Mama has plenty of friends now to keep her company. She even recently decided to try dating again, having been inspired by my own good fortune in that department. Thankfully, she's got Doreen by her side to help vet any suitors. No scrubs for my mama!

When Callum and I began finalizing our plans to relocate to Scotland together, Mama and I made a pact that she'd visit once a year, and Callum and I would visit her once a year.

Her first visit is almost upon us.

"I cannae wait to see you in person," Helen gushes as she speaks with Mama on my phone. "We'll have so much to talk about, and I want you to try my homemade shortbread. I know you'll love it."

"Oh, Helen, I'm looking forward to that very much. I'm planning to make some of my homemade biscuits and gravy while I'm there, too. Poor Beau's been craving them lately, and Callum just loved them when he visited. You'll try some too, won't you?"

"When Callum told me about them, I had to look them up. I won't lie, the look of them was surprising, but they sound scrumptious. Count me in."

"Am I even gonna get to spend any time with Mama while she's here?" I murmur to Callum as they talk.

Chuckling, he stands behind me and pulls me into an embrace. "You may have to fight my mum for time with her. Those two are thick as thieves."

"Your Dad seems happy about it though."

Callum snorts. "Aye. Mum was driving him bloody nuts after retiring. She needs other people and things to occupy her time, and Sarah Jane's been a huge help in that regard. Dad can finally work out in his shed in peace, or so he tells me."

Helen and Mama hit it off from the moment they first met over video. When Callum and I went to Alabama to tell Mama my plans and start working on preliminary arrangements, she'd demanded we call Callum's parents. In her book, the two of us were as good as engaged if I was moving to another country to be with him.

Helen and Mama were both equally grateful to the other for having a son who could treat hers right, each convinced that the other's boy was the one who'd come to the rescue of their own hapless child.

Ever since, they've been video-chatting at least once a week and even more so lately in anticipation of Mama's upcoming visit.

Callum's father, Lachlan, is more like his son, quiet but a keen observer. He wasn't quite as ready to accept me with open arms right away. But shortly after Callum had to return home, to start the visa application process for me and sell his flat in London, he had a bad flare-up with his back that

landed him in the hospital. I dropped everything and booked the first flight I could to take care of him.

Fortunately, Callum wasn't in the hospital for long, but I nursed him every single day once we were able to return to his place. I helped with his physical therapy exercises, assisted him in the shower when he was having weakness on one side of his body, and kept his spirits up the whole time. He'd been reluctant to have me see him like that, but I quickly booted that foolish notion right out of his head. I even got him a dapper cane to use when he needs it that's far more stylish than his old one but still functional. When Beau Montgomery makes a commitment, he doesn't bail the moment things get tough, no siree!

Callum's parents came down to help out as well but went back home after a few days. As they were leaving, Lachlan pulled me aside, gave me a bear-crushing hug, and thanked me for loving his son. He said my actions showed him how much I care for Callum and how serious I am about our relationship.

And once he discovered I was the one who'd convinced Callum to move back to Edinburgh so we could be closer to his parents, I somehow earned Lachlan's undying devotion. He calls me son now. It's so sweet and honestly kind of nice. He's the closest to a father I've ever really had, and I'm honored to know I've earned his trust and respect.

The hardest part of the whole process of moving was getting the darn visa. We ended up getting married in a civil ceremony to help me qualify for a spousal visa, but we're holding off on an actual wedding until the business is stable. Besides, Mama and Helen are still duking it out over whether the ceremony will be held in Alabama or Scotland.

We're keeping out of it until they reach an agreement.

But now I've been here nearly two months and we've finally opened our brand-new business.

The office phone—a vintage rotary one I found at an antique store—starts ringing and I give Callum an excited kiss before hurrying to answer it.

“Hello, this is SPOOKED—Supernatural Phenomena, Odd Otherworldly Knowledge, and Entity Detection. I'm Beau, how can I help you?”

I listen as the man on the other end tells me about the vintage Jaguar convertible he bought and how he thinks it might be haunted.

“Mm-hmm. Mr. McEwan, you’re right. That sounds mighty suspicious and very possibly supernatural. Would you like us to come out for a free consultation?”

“Yes, please. Can you swing by around 4:00 this afternoon?”

I check my pocket watch. Plenty of time.

“That shouldn’t be a problem as long as you’re not too far from Edinburgh.”

“I’m down in Morningside.”

I mouth that to Callum with a questioning look, and he gives me a wide smile and a thumbs-up.

“Not a problem, sir. We’ll be there.”

I jot down the man’s address and phone number.

“See you at 4:00,” Mr. McEwan says.

I grin. “Wonderful. We’ll see you then.”

I hang up the phone and, with a loud whoop, jump into Callum’s arms, wrapping my legs around his hips and clinging to him like a monkey.

“We’ve got our first potential case!”

He smiles at me, eyes soft and full of love. “What did I say? You and me, we’re unbeatable.”

“Darn tootin’, darlin’. Now let’s get to work.”

THANKS!

Thanks to my amazing editor for going above and beyond in the tight time crunch on this one.

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Y'all are the best!

This adventure may be over, but the ghostly fun does not stop there. View the rest of the ExorSquad series online: <https://mybook.to/ExorSquad>

ExorSquad Series

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chloe Archer writes queer sci-fi and paranormal rom-coms with laugh out loud humor, zany shenanigans, silly acronyms, and plenty of spice!

She currently calls Minnesota home, but has lived abroad in places like Montreal, Edinburgh, and Tokyo. She's hoping to relocate to Scotland permanently in the next few years if the stars align.

Chloe is a fur mama to two adorable Yorkies, Jasper and Teddy, and she loves them in a crazy dog mama kind of way. When she isn't busy writing, she enjoys visiting friends and family, traveling, reading, binge watching movies and TV shows, and practicing her karaoke skills. She does a mean cover of Pat Benatar and Cher, or so she's been told.

For more books and updates visit:

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