



# **Halloween Hexapalooza**

**A Girl's Guide to Voodoo Bounty Hunting Halloween Story**

**By Eden Crowne**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Nessa knew she'd made a mistake coming to Monterey when the Jack O' Lantern by the front door started speaking.

In Spanish.

"*Mal paso esta abierto*," it hissed. "*Mal paso esta abiertoooooooo*," rolling the final vowel for dramatic effect.

Nessa's Spanish was pretty sketchy, but she knew enough to translate this.

'Mal' was bad or evil. 'Paso' meant road.

'Mal Paso esta abierto' equaled: The evil road is open.

Great. Just great.

She should have turned around, shouldered her backpack, picked up Pim, and hightailed it back to the airport shuttle and home to LA right then.

Sayonara Monterey and the California Central Coast.

Should have, could have, would have.

"Is it electric maybe?" she asked Pim. "Motion sensor?" she added hopefully.

Ears back, and tail straight up, Pim stepped cautiously up to the oversized Jack O' Lantern by the front door of the townhouse. A wind from the sea blew across the sand dunes at their backs, ruffling his fur and tossing Nessa's bangs in her face. The sea was only a dozen yards away, filling the air with a musty, salty tang from the breaking waves.

Pim sniffed around the base of the pumpkin.

"*Mal Pasoooo!*" wailed the Jack O' Lantern.

Pim jumped a full three feet in surprise flipping an acrobatic sideways somersault to land behind Nessa.

He hissed.

"*Abiertooo!*" the pumpkin finished.

Evil road and a Spanish speaking pumpkin. What had Fionna gotten them into this time?

It had started innocently enough, as these things always do. Especially with Fionna.

Fionna Garde. Rich, young, Black Magic-loving witch currently on Infernal Court Probation and Nessa's roommate because Nessa's Aunt Emerald likes money.

"You look like you need a vacation," Fionna said just yesterday morning.

"I look like I what?" Nessa sputtered, nearly choking on her swallow of coffee.

Her witchy roommate stood on the other side of the little kitchen table, hands on hips, staring critically at Nessa. "Vacation. You look like hell."

Nessa sighed. She couldn't argue with that. And certainly not with the entitled young witch.

Fionna did not look like hell. Fionna never looked like hell. Despite the early hour, the pretty young woman was perfectly groomed, her shoulder length platinum blond bob neatly brushed, her favorite peony-flowered kimono falling in elegant folds over a pink silk sleep short set. And...did she already have mascara on? Of course, she did.

Nessa was not wearing mascara. Beneath the tangle of blond hair hanging in her face, she was sure the dark circles under her eyes made her look like she'd been in a fist fight. One she lost.

What was worse, the custom-made blue contacts disguising the inky black darkness of her true eye color – thanks for selling your soul to a Fallen Angel, mom – were still in their contact solution by her bed. So she had an endearing, demonic-air about her.

Nessa was slouched in the chair, wearing her wrinkled green 'Lucky Club' sleep tee from Old Navy and ancient fleece pajama pants with the faded logo 'coffee is always a good idea' printed all over in riotous colors.

Pim, her feline Familiar, wasn't in much better shape. His thick gray fur was smooshed to one side, his whiskers pointing in all directions. One ear stood up, the other down. Of course, only Nessa could see Pim's condition since he was invisible to everyone else due to an unfortunate century-old gypsy curse.

"Don't judge," she groaned to Fionna, "We had a rough day yesterday."

Had they ever. Nessa and Pim were novice supernatural bounty hunters thanks to her deadbeat dad running out on a massive debt to LA's leading Bail Bondsman and Voodoo King, Roman Barracuda. The debt wasn't money. It was magic and guess who dear-old-dad left as collateral?

Yesterday, Mr. Barracuda had slapped down a warrant from the Infernal Court to bring in a little old lady who had missed her court date. Seems the Earth Elemental had been hired to sabotage a construction site by a rival company. What she didn't know was the construction site foreman was a Warlock and recognized the sabotage as supernatural. He'd brought charges.

"Easy," Mr. Barracuda said. "Five foot nothing. Got to be ninety by now. Earth witch. Minor stuff. She'll come quietly. Won't give you any trouble."

Mr. Barracuda had lied.

Lied, lied, lied.

Lied about everything except the woman's size. The witch was indeed five feet tall but ninety or not, she looked like Sabrina Carpenter and was a kick-your-ass-to-hell-and-back vindictive witch who definitely did not want to come quietly.

She nearly buried Nessa and Pim in landslides in Malibu Canyon. Twice.

Nessa, an Air Elemental, retaliated by raising a whirlwind to surround the witch. The witch promptly tunneled beneath the cyclone like a human mole throwing a tsunami of dirt over Nessa and Pim.

Nessa, shifting into panic mode, whistled up a whirlwind to surround them. Before the dust had settled, the witch burst out of the ground beneath their feet, screaming hexes as sharp as daggers.

Nessa called down the lightning, strike after strike in pinpoint precision, to keep the hexes from her throat.

Pim transformed into his werecat form, tackling the witch from behind. He succeeded in pinning her to the ground with his salad-plate sized paws and wrapping his jaws around her throat.

The witch wisely shut her mouth and the hexes dispersed in a rush of black ash.

After slapping a pair of spellcast cuffs on the witch and sealing her mouth with duct tape, Nessa had to call Fionna for help.

Nessa carried out most of her Bounty Hunting jobs on the back of a bright orange 50cc scooter.

There was no way the woman would agree to hold still on the back of Nessa's scooter for the ride to the infernal Court in Redondo Beach. Unless Nessa mummified her in duct tape, there was no way Nessa could transport the woman all the way there.

Fionna had come. She didn't really have a choice. The witch was on parole to Barracuda Bail Bonds after causing too much self-serving magical mayhem in Glendale. The death of a herd of sacred sheep as a result of her Black Magic blowback is what landed her in official trouble. Technically her community service was helping Nessa and the Mr. Barracuda. 'Helping' was open to interpretation in Fionna's dictionary Nessa had found.

At least she'd showed up. She insisted on spreading a black rubber tarp across the backseat of her shiny, high-end Audi to contain the dusty runoff from the Witch and Pim. Nessa followed on her scooter leaving a literal cloud of dust.

Even after three showers last night, Nessa still had dirt in her hair and grit between her teeth.

Unlike movie witches who seemed to have unlimited power, in real life, spells exerted a physical toll on the user. Nessa had used a lot. She was feeling every bit of the magical power drain this morning. Pim had to be just as bad.

As her Familiar, he merged his power to hers. By the time they got the witch contained, Nessa had been running on empty.

"How would you like a holiday by the beach?" Fionna said in an all-too-cheery voice.

Nessa gestured wearily toward the kitchen window over the galley sink, "Do you mean I should go to the beach? The beach which is three blocks over there?" She gestured toward the window. "Since we live in a town called Hermosa Beach and there is indeed a beach and the Pacific Ocean?"

"*Another beach,*" Fionna said with emphasis. "A different beach. One far from Barracuda Bail Bonds."

Nessa and Pim's eyes met over their coffee cups. His whiskers twitched.

“How far?” she asked.

“More than four hundred miles.” She put her hands on her hips and adopted a triumphant pose. “Courtesy of me, your glorious and magnanimous roommate.”

Nessa narrowed her eyes to stare at Fionna. “Where? I am not going into Mexico.” Her dad had burned some dangerous people in Mexico over the years. Nessa made it a point to stay north of the border.

“Not Mexico,” Fionna said, waving a hand to brush the thought away. “Monterey. Up north.”

Pim’s eyes widened.

“Monterey?” Nessa repeated.

“Meow-meow?” said Pim.

“Yep. Historical Monterey on the Central Coast of our Golden State.”

“Because?” said Nessa suspiciously.

Fionna made a face, “You don't have to take that tone of voice. My cousin has a lovely townhouse on the beach, walking distance to downtown.”

“And?” Nessa said in the same, flat tone.

“And,” said Fionna, “she’s going away for a few days. Spending Samhain in Dublin with our Irish cousins.”

“And...” pursued Nessa.

“And I am going to Cabo today. I was supposed to house sit for her but this trip sort of came up at the last minute.”

Nessa rolled her eyes, “*And?*”

“And she has a cat. The cat doesn’t like to fly... in planes,” she added.

Pim popped up looking far more alert than a few moments before.

Nessa gave him a dark look. Pim had a wandering eye. Precisely why he got cursed into invisibility in the first place.

On the trip from England to America with Nessa’s Great Grandmother, Pim had fallen for a winsome Calico. Unfortunately, the Calico belonged to a Gypsy Witch who did not approve of the liaison. She’d cursed Pim into invisibility.

“Meow?” he said in an inquisitive tone.

Fionna gave Pim a bored look in his general direction. Since he was invisible, she couldn’t actually see where he was. “Tom cat,” she added.

“Meow,” he sighed, sounding disappointed.

‘Good,’ Nessa thought. She knew his current crush was a beautiful supernatural white cat called Bodega Blanca. A transplant from a New York Bodega to a Los Angeles Taco Truck.

Nessa waved a hand dismissively in the air. “Doesn’t matter. I can’t go to Monterey on my motorbike.”

Fionna scooted out the third chair at the table and sat down, her face all smiles. “My cousin, Harper, will pay for your flight, transportation to and from the airport, also for the shuttle to her townhouse, and fifty dollars a day in expenses. From today, or tomorrow to Sunday or even Monday if you want an extra day.”

Nessa furrowed her brow, working out the dates. “It’s Halloween weekend. Saturday is Halloween”

“Yep. Today’s Thursday. Fly out tonight or Friday morning depending on your school schedule. The cat will be fine for a day or so until you get there.”

“Meow,” said Pim, tail flicking back and forth, his eyes wide, his face hopeful. “Meow, meow, meow.”

Nessa knew her Familiar well enough to understand he wanted to do this. And, in fact, a long weekend away sounded fun. They hadn’t been out of LA County in... a year? Yes, it had to be a year. Dad had surprised them with a visit and a trip to San Diego and Sea World and the Wild Animal Park before she moved in with her Aunt Emerald. Dad was the one who had fostered her love of animals and so much more. He might be a crook and a thief, but the man loved museums, art, music, other cultures, aquariums and so much more.

They’d led such a vagabond life since she was born. It would be nice to be on the move if only for a few days.

Reaching out, she ran a hand over Pim’s soft head, caressing his ears. There was a chemistry lab today. She had time to complete the lab and write up the result.

She was studying to be a meteorologist, first at Santa Monica College then, fingers crossed, transferring to U.C. Long Beach. Since she was an Air Elemental, meteorology seemed a logical choice for a career. Let’s see. The Sociology essay was due Tuesday. The essay was mostly finished. She just needed to clean it up and write the conclusion. She didn’t have class on Friday.

“Barracuda!” she moaned, remembering her life was far more complicated than college classes. Roman Barracuda, head of Barracuda Bail Bonds, was her boss. Technically he was much more.

Nessa was effectively an indentured Bail Bonds’ employee until Mr. Barracuda decided her dad’s bond had been paid in full.

“Don’t worry,” said Fionna, “I’ll talk to him.”

Considering Mr. Barracuda’s low opinion of the young, entitled witch, Nessa wasn’t sure Fionna stepping in would help.

“It will be fine,” reassured Fionna. “So...will you go?”



“Sure,” said Nessa. “Why not?”

“Great. Let me call Harper right now.” Fionna had her cell phone in her hand and was already tapping. Her cousin picked up right away. “Harper. Hey, hi. About Halloween weekend. I’m sitting here with Nessa and her murder cat, Pim,” she laughed.

“Don’t call him a murder cat!” Nessa snapped.

Fionna loved calling Pim a ‘murder cat’ because of his alternate self: a fierce werecat as big as a Lynx with paws and claws to match.

Nessa heard the person on the line bark out a laugh so she must know about Pim. Damn Fionna. She talked way too much about Nessa’s private business.

“Yeah, yeah,” Fionna said. “She’s agreed to come up north. Do you want to talk to her ...okay, I’ll put the phone on speaker.”

“Harper this is my friend Nessa. Nessa, my cousin, Harper Garde.”

Nessa’s eyebrows shot up and Pim’s eyes widened. Fionna had just called Nessa her ‘friend.’ Whoa. That was a first.

“Hey, hi,” said a youthful voice on the speaker. “Harper here.”

“Hi,” Nessa replied. “I’m Nessa and Pim is here too.”

Pim meowed a greeting.

“And he is not a murder cat,” she added glaring at Fionna.

“I’m sure he isn’t,” said Harper. “I just want to confirm. You agree to come up north here and look after my cat, Bob?”

‘Bob? Nessa thought. ‘What a funny name for a cat.’

Pim’s ears twitched and he cocked his head at a sharp angle.

Evidently Pim thought so too.

“Yes,” Nessa answered. “Sure. I’ll watch him. Leave me a note with all the details about food etcetera, okay?”

“I will. But again, I’d like you to confirm you will take care of Bob.”

Nessa’s eyebrows drew together but she didn’t see any reason not to agree. “Of course, I, um, confirm I will look after your cat.”

“To the best of your ability. I’m not asking for anything more.”

“To the best of my ability,” Nessa repeated, because, why not? Bob was a cat. She understood cats pretty well. Pim had no complaints, at least.

Fionna let out a long breath. It sounded suspiciously like relief.

Why did Nessa feel she’d suddenly agreed to a lot more than feeding a cat?



## CHAPTER TWO

Fionna did indeed clear the short holiday with Mr. Barracuda. Nessa thought it was better not to ask any details in case her boss changed his mind.

They flew out of LAX early Thursday morning. The airport was just a short drive from Hermosa Beach along the Pacific Coast Highway. Fionna had even volunteered to drop them off despite the early hour.

Nessa and Pim were happy and excited. Free from Barracuda Bail Bonds. Free from chasing the supernatural slimeballs running out on their bonds. Free from ghosts and goblins and especially Elemental Earth Witches trying to bury them in landslides.

Pim, being invisible, happily trotted around the TSA officers and machines. Nessa had to be slightly more cautious. Fionna's friend had wrangled a VIP pass through security. Nevertheless, Nessa was carrying things the TSA definitely would not allow – if they knew about them.

The only thing the machine saw in Nessa's spellbound backpack was a couple of tee shirts, a sweater, jacket, socks, and underwear. The ritual knife she always carried scanned as a mirror. Her supernatural Bone Brush came up as shoes. Grandma' Hattie had created the enchantment for them the last summer they'd spent together. She left the Fairie Crown, a gift, or curse depending on your point of view, from the Queen of Air at home. The crown enabled her to open a Portal anywhere in the Fae World as long as she could visualize it. She didn't think she'd need to pop into Faerie over the weekend.

The bag of salt she always carried showed up as a bag of salt, which they inevitably wanted to take out and test.

She had to take off her summoning belt for the scanner. The summoning belt had been created by her Grandmother Hattie to enhance Nessa's Elemental Air magic. The many air, wind, and lightning sigils around the belt were embroidered by her grandmother with thread soaked in Nessa's own blood. Not fun. The silver weather charms to boost the embroidered sigils were her grandmother's. Nessa had taken them from Hattie's house after Frank, the Fallen Angel, murdered her. Hattie had discovered Frank's true Angelic name.

Names give you power. Nessa's name, Vanessa, was her common name. Only her father, Pim, and of course Nessa, knew her secret name. Frank killed Hattie in revenge not knowing she had already told Nessa.

Nessa's mom and Grandma' Hattie's only child, Genevieve Chevalier, made a dark magic bargain to change her magical DNA. She did so not knowing Nessa was already forming in her womb.

Frank knew.

Oh, hell yes, the Fallen Angel knew.

When Nessa's mom died in childbirth, Frank tried to claim Nessa as his own. Her dad rescued the newborn and they'd been on the run ever since.

The silver charms on the belt always set off the TSA alarms. Which was fine. To anyone else, the belt looked like a trendy Boho accessory.

After takeoff, she and Pim gleefully shared the breakfast they packed for the trip: two fat almond croissants, a large, iced coffee to share (Pim lapped, Nessa sipped through the straw) and some Chicken Nuggets they picked up at the airport.

The seat next to Nessa was empty and she twisted around so her back was to the opposite row. With Pim on her lap, they looked out the window, munching happily as they watched the brown hills roll by. It was clear all the way up the coast and fun being in the air again. Nessa hadn't realized how much she missed traveling.

She and her dad and, after Grandma' Hattie died, Pim had spent their lives traveling around the world. Constantly on the move. This was largely due to Nessa's curse. However, Frank wasn't the only reason for their vagabond existence. Some of it was running from the victims of her dad's nefarious magical cons. For whatever reason, they were always traveling.

Los Angeles to San Jose is only a short jaunt by air. They landed a little over an hour later at San Jose Mineta International Airport. From San Jose, Fionna's cousin arranged a seat on a regular shuttle operating between the airport and Monterey, about an hour and a half away depending on traffic.

During the ride, Nessa and Pim pulled up some websites on the history of Monterey. She'd studied California history in her online school, but she couldn't remember many details about the area. According to the Net, during the Mexican American war in the mid 1840s, an American naval squadron under the command of John Drake Sloat invaded Monterey Bay. He and his men took down the Mexican flag and raised the Stars and Stripes without so much as a by-your-leave. They promptly declared Monterey now belonged to the U.S. of A., thank you very much. It was a peaceful takeover, thankfully, since the residents seemed to be blessed with an insightful 'live and let live' attitude towards their governing body.

"Cool," whispered Nessa in Pim's ears. "Probably some fun historical places to explore."

He licked her cheek and nuzzled her under the jaw. They were both excited about being in a new place. Halloween was on Saturday and the two of them had three nights by the beach.

From San Jose, the scenery was standard NorCal brown rolling hills, stands of oaks that looked a lot like broccoli Nessa always thought, and suburban sprawl. Once they turned off the 101 onto a narrow two-lane highway and from there merging onto Highway One, things changed.

Nessa was used to the sprawl of beach cities along LA's South Bay. One town merging messily into the other. Buildings and homes shoulder to shoulder crowding the shore from Malibu to Palos Verdes. Hotels, strip malls, and fast-food joints lining the Pacific Coast Highway.

Monterey County was different. The beaches here were so undeveloped Nessa could hardly believe it. Empty sand dunes stretched, mile after mile. Virtually no buildings on the shore. Deserted beaches with farmland rolling right up to the dunes. Even the town they passed, Castroville the highway sign said, was away from the sea. Though she did spy a fast-food drive-thru near the freeway, so it was not a totally alien landscape.

Where was everybody?

This was her first time on the Central Coast. She and her dad had been in San Francisco a few times, Santa Barbara once. Mostly they kept to the Midwest, Southwest, and the South including Florida. A few forays into the Northeast. Places far from the Infernal Court and its investigators.

Opening her phone, she typed in some questions to the Search Engine, angling the phone so Pim could read with her.

"Oh, Okay, I see," she said after scrolling through a few screens.

Monterey Bay was a protected Marine area. No building had been allowed on the shore in decades.

Now it made more sense. Nevertheless, the lack of development seemed strange after living in Los Angeles for a year. The only concept of 'empty' on Nessa's stretch of coastline was looking out to sea.

As they neared Monterey, she spied one hotel right on the shore of Highway One. It must be a legacy property, predating the Marine Sanctuary rulings.

After passing the hotel, she called the Ride Share number from Fionna's cousin. Harper truly had arranged everything for them. The plane ticket, the shuttle from the airport, the Ride Share to the townhouse plus extra credits so they could get around town. Nessa felt like a VIP. Something she hadn't experienced in a long time.

The sun peaked out from behind the clouds as they approached the city, making the sea sparkle and shine.

She squeezed Pim and kissed the top of his head.

The shuttle let them out by a two-story parking garage on the edge of downtown Monterey. As they got off the bus, Nessa saw an oversized poster on the wall decorated with grinning Jack O'Lanterns, cartoonish witches, and ghosts dancing on a green lawn. Brightly colored candies, plates of food, and drinks circled the figures. 'Halloween Hexapalooza' was written across the top in gothic-looking orange letters. Along the bottom it said, 'Family Friendly Carnival, Colton Hall Lawn, games, live music and

entertainment all day. Food and fun! October 31, Halloween, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Tickets 3\$. Kids under 6 Free.”

Halloween was only a day away.

Pim was nestled in her arms, and they snuggled close.

““I wonder what they do for Halloween here,” she said quietly to him. “It’s a big tourist town. And they have a famous aquarium.”

Pim perked up, ears alert. They loved aquariums. Pim for obvious reasons.

“Wouldn’t it be fun if they had a Halloween event at the aquarium?”

Pim wriggled in agreement.

They both loved Halloween. What supernatural person or creature didn’t? It was Samhain after all, the ancient Celtic celebration welcoming the New Year. A celebration of old endings and new beginnings. A day the veil between the worlds of both the living and the dead and everywhere in between thinned to nothing.

It was also a time to honor the dead. Nessa had brought Grandma Hattie’s picture in a tiny frame so she and Pim could still make the little altar they put together for her every year.

“The Net says there’s a Trader Joe’s in town,” she whispered to Pim. “We’ll get Hattie some pretty flowers and chocolate truffles and fruit. Strawberries, don’t you think?”

Pim butted her under her jaw, rubbing his furry head back and forth, deep throated purrs rumbling in his chest.

They both had faith no matter where Hattie was, she’d feel their love. Hattie was out there somewhere, still watching over Nessa and Pim. They knew for a fact she wasn’t trapped in some hell constructed by Frank the Fallen Angel. Even though he’d tried to make them believe he held her spirit. Her Grandmother had appeared on the bridge in Pasadena when Frank attacked her a couple of weeks ago, bringing a host of spirits with her for support and giving Nessa a new sigil to hide her from the Fallen Angel.

Nessa spotted the car’s license plate for their ride. A black Honda Fit.

Scooting in the back seat, she said hello to the driver, a woman.

Within minutes they merged onto a busy street with the beach right in front of them. A short way further and they paused at the gated community where Fionna’s cousin’s townhouse was.

The driver had the gate code and within ten minutes of leaving the shuttle they were walking up the steps to the front door of the townhouse.

And that’s where things went bad.

The pumpkin warning them the ‘evil road is open’ was just the beginning.

Despite the chatty pumpkin, Nessa went ahead and opened the digital front door lock using the code Fiona gave them. With a 'click' it automatically swung aside a few inches. An enormous brown Tortie cat squeezed out to stare up at them.

Nessa looked at him and the cat looked at her. She swallowed back her surprise, it had to be one of the ugliest cats she'd ever seen. One ear was missing, the other halfway chewed off. Its mouth was misshapen, with a scar twisting its cheek to one side. Its tail was only a short, twisted knot. Patches of fur were missing here and there, exposing dark gray skin.

"Bob?" asked Nessa.

"Meow?" echoed Pim.

"Get the hell inside," the cat said gesturing with one paw.

Nessa jumped back and Pim leaped up onto the deck railing.

The cat *said*.

In actual words.

"It spoke!" Nessa choked out, pointing at the mangled Tom.

Pim yowled, the yowl transforming into a deep throated growl of warning.

The cat stared at them, clearly unimpressed. "Of course, I spoke. What you think I am, girl? Some kind of animal?"

The cat had a Western drawl. Like a cowboy on TV.

Nessa looked at Pim. Pim stared from her to the cat before gesturing with his head they should enter.

"Yes, I'm Bob," the cat said in a bored voice. "You're Miss Vanessa and Mister Pim. Before you come in, grab the bag of salt on the side table."

There was indeed a large two-pound bag of salt on a little table next to one of the balcony deck chairs.

"Spread the salt on the landing and over the bottom of your shoes and over yourselves starting at the top. Don't want you tracking in nothing from wherever you're from."

They did as he said. This process was not unusual. Salt was a witch's first choice in keeping bad entities out of their home or away from themselves.

"Now shut the dang door and come in before you let something inside."

Nessa replaced the bag. She let Pim go in first then shut the door as the cat said.

"Did you make the pumpkin speak?" she asked, throwing a pinch of salt she'd saved over her left shoulder. "Was that a joke?"

"I wish," hissed the cat. "Stupid thing started talking this morning."

"In Spanish," Nessa asked, for confirmation.

“Yep. In Spanish. Dang thing is possessed. I told Harper not to buy it from a roadside stand. You got no idea where they got it from. Stupid thing is cursed.”

Forget the pumpkin, Nessa thought. “Why can you *talk*?” she asked.

Nessa had never encountered a talking animal. Even Chuck, the Lobo, a wolf who could transform into a man, only made wolf sounds in animal form.

The cat sighed as if he had the weight of the world on his furry shoulders. “There’s a story in need of food.”

“Am I wrong or does the cat sound like a cowboy?” she said quietly to Pim.

Before Pim could answer Bob growled, “Cuz I *was* a cowboy, dang it. A U.S. Marshall, and a helluva’ lot more before gettin’ trapped in this cursed form.”

He stalked into the kitchen, knotted tail twisting in angry circles as Nessa and Pim followed.

The townhouse was compact but gorgeous. Open plan. Big picture windows around the front wall overlooking the ocean just a short walk over the dunes. The furniture was all white and sea green. A wide, deep sofa dominated the living room. A big easy chair sat at one end and two more formal straight-backed chairs formed a triangle at the other. The furniture was set on a sea grass rug. Rectangular coffee table in the middle and a small gas fireplace in the opposite wall. Side tables had ginger-style lamps in orange, green, and yellow. The pillows on the sofa and chairs were decorated with shells and sea creatures in a rich mix of greens and light blues.

A couple of oversized ferns decorated the corners. The dining room table was rustic butcher block style with six white Chinese Chippendale chairs around it. A big yellow bowl ringed with Chinese dragons and filled with sea shells stood in the center of the table on an ornately carved wooden stand.

The kitchen was small but sparkling with shiny, stainless-steel appliances.

Nessa’s heart gave a little twist. This was exactly how she’d dreamed of decorating her own home. A permanent place to live. All light and bright and beachy.

Never going to happen, she sighed inwardly. Not with Frank the Fallen Angel after her. She brushed the thought away. She wouldn’t let Frank ruin this little holiday.

A set of carpeted stairs led to the upper level. The bedrooms probably.

Bob stood in front of an automatic feeder.

“Is it out?” Nessa asked, leaning down to unlock the top lid.

“Need the good stuff,” the cat growled.

He pointed to the bottom drawer in the cabinet next to the feeder. “There.”

Nessa slid open the drawer. It was full of cat treat bags.

Pim hopped up on his back legs to peek inside, sniffing the air, whiskers twitching.

“Which one?” Nessa asked.



“Crack open one of them squeeze things,” Bob said.

Nessa pulled out a package of thin squeezezy packs. Pim liked these, too.

“Scissors?” she asked.

“Middle drawer, left side of the stove.”

The scissors were easily found. She squatted down to snip a pack open and squeeze some out.

Bob eagerly lapped at the gooey treat.

“Yeah,” he sighed, “that’s good.”

Pim licked his lips.

Bob raised an eyebrow, “Give the kid one,” he said, gesturing at Pim with his chin.

She hadn’t been sure the cat could see Pim but obviously he could. Most animals were able to see Pim.

Squeezing the rest out for Bob in one of the cat’s eating bowls, Nessa picked a color from the pack she knew Pim liked best.

Snipping the top, she held it as he eagerly licked up the treat.

Bob quietly enjoyed his snack, muttering to himself occasionally under his breath.

“Harper’s cousin Fionna said you don’t like to fly,” Nessa said conversationally. “Which is why you didn’t go to Ireland with her.”

Bob squinted at her with his one good eye. “Danged newfangled travel.”

‘Newfangled’ commercial flights had been around since around World War One, Nessa knew. But time often passed differently for the supernaturally inclined.

“Do you miss her? Harper, I mean.”

Pim paused from his treat to bump her thigh with his head. She lovingly stroked his ears. She couldn’t imagine being away from him. They hadn’t been apart for a day since he bonded with her after Hattie’s murder five years ago.

Bob gave a sound between a snort and a sneeze, “Gal’s alright, I guess.”

“Are you her Familiar?” Nessa pressed, curious about their relationship. Fionna didn’t have a Familiar. Did her cousin? Was it a family thing not to have Familiars?

He snorted again. “Why would you think that? I’m my own man. Always have been. Always will be.”

“What exactly are you?” Nessa asked.

Bob’s head whipped up and he frowned at her or at least she assumed it was a frown. Only one side of his mouth moved. The other was twisted into a permanent grin showing his incisors.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Pim is a sentient cat who can transform into a werecat in the blink of an eye. What are you?”

He snorted in obvious indignation, “I’m a talking cat! Ain’t talkin’ enough magic?”

Nessa moved back, “Yes, yes. Sorry. Didn’t mean to assume.”

“The hell you didn’t,” he snorted. “Dang uppity witch.” His voice changed into a high singsong tone, “*What else are you, Bob?* What else can you do? I could show you!” He gave her a menacing look.

Pim stepped between Bob and Nessa, growling a warning to the other cat to mind his manners.

Nessa ran a hand down her Familiar’s back.

“It’s okay, Pim. It’s okay. He’s not really threatening me.”

“Hell I’m not,” Bob said. But he backed away, stalking over to a big gray cat bed in one corner of the compact kitchen. Flopping down, he turned his back on them.

Nessa made a point of clearing her throat loudly. “We’ll just go upstairs and unpack. Um. Which bedroom should we use?”

“Middle one,” Bob growled, not looking at them. “Guests usually sleep there. Them and her no account, waste of space boyfriend when they fight.”

Nessa snagged her backpack from the couch and headed up the stairs with Pim in the lead.

“Sheets are clean,” Bob yelled.

The narrow hallway had several framed prints of Chinese embroidery: Mandarin ducks, a phoenix, a panel of colorful carp.

The middle bedroom door was open. It was compact but big enough to hold a Queen-sized bed, two side tables with Ginger Jar lamps, and a white chest of drawers.

Pim jumped onto the bed, looking around.

“This is nice,” she said to him.

“Meow,” he agreed with a nod.

Mid-sized windows looked out over parking for adjacent units, some big cypress and pine trees and landscaped beds of flowering plants with a little edge of an ocean view. The windows were open. The room smelled clean and fresh with a salty sea tang.

The bathroom was across the hall.

She didn’t have to worry about a litter box. Pim was a proper gentleman and always used the toilet. She assumed Bob did as well.

“Bob is interesting. Do you want your Speak and Spell?” she asked.

The bright red little device was far more than the simple toy it had been intended for. Cat’s vocal cords, even magical cats with the exception maybe of Bob, are not made for human speech. Pim had six claws on his front paws, the extra one working as an opposable thumb. Even so, his paws were too

awkward for most keyboards. Grandma' Hattie had hit on the *Speak and Spell* back in the day. Way back. Since Nessa inherited Pim as her own Familiar, she and her dad had made upgrades within a millimeter of the machine's plastic casing. Most probably highly illegal. They'd transformed it into an efficient, WiFi connected, talking laptop even though it still looked like a toy.

It was a perfect tool for Pim's quick, inventive mind.

He gave a quick shake of his head. Instead, he jumped off the bed and pointed to the door with his paw.

"Explore the town?" Nessa asked.

In answer he trotted down the stairs to the first floor.

It was only noon. They had the whole day in front of them.

"Where you all off to?" Bob asked as they headed for the door.

Before Nessa could answer, Bob declared, "Comin' with you. I know this town. Cat carrier and harness are behind the door there." He pointed a paw at a white lattice door near the staircase. "I need to go out and patrol anyway. Been getting a strange feeling ever since that dang girl brought home the cursed pumpkin. Besides you're supposed to keep an eye on me and vice versa."

True statement. Nessa *had* agreed to take care of the cat. The fact she hadn't known it would be a magical cat-cowboy with an Old West attitude and mouth to match was irrelevant.

Oh well, too late now.

Opening the lattice door revealed the guest bathroom, a closet, and pegs in the wall holding both the harness and a slightly unconventionally shaped backpack. This must be the cat carrier.

Unlike invisible Pim, Bob had to observe rules when he was out and about.

Nessa was surprised when he obediently stood still to have the harness fastened around his chest. He seemed like a very proud cat.

"You don't mind this?" she asked, kneeling beside him.

"I ain't stupid," he'd replied a little icily, standing still so she could fasten the well-worn leather straps around him. "Can't just walk around town in broad daylight. Nights are different, of course. But daytime? Gotta' swallow my pride."

Nessa shouldered the cat carrier backpack though she looked longingly at her own worn black canvas one she'd tossed on the sofa after Bob declared his intention of coming with them. She couldn't handle both. The Bone Brush and knife could stay here. There was no twitchiness around her feet like Frank the Fallen Angel's searchers were near. She put the small bag of salt she'd brought in with Bob. Also, a bottle of mineral water.

As the three of them walked out the front door the pumpkin moaned, "*Mal Paso. Mal Pasoooooo.*"

Pim and Nessa both jumped in surprise.

Bob ignored it.

“How long has your pumpkin been talking?” Nessa asked, keying in the electronic keypad to lock the door.

“Three days. Pretty much soon as Harper carved the face.”

“And she *kept* it?” Nessa would have lit a pyre on the beach at midnight inside a ring of salt, doused it with lighter fluid, tossed a match, and watched the cursed thing burn. Then she’d have let the waves wash the ashes out to sea.

Because...talking pumpkin? Halloween around the corner?

Oh, hell no.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Bob guided them to a paved recreation trail for bicycles and walkers less than a block away. He declared it was his duty to show them around.

Here by the town house the trail paralleled a grassy park and beach volleyball courts with a busy street beyond.

“See the street there? Del Monte Avenue,” Bob explained. “Takes you through to what the locals call New Monterey. Though the name changes to Lighthouse Avenue.”

“Is there a lighthouse?” Ness asked, looking at the busy road.

“Nope,” said Bob.

Opposite the street were low dunes covered in what she assumed were native plants. It smelled dry and *sage-brushy*. The beach was far narrower than those of Hermosa Beach, Redondo Beach, and Manhattan Beach by Aunt Emerald’s. Only half the width if not less. They must have trouble with high tides washing out the trail.

Several squatters had set up nylon tents in the shelter of some big pines in the park with boxes and nylon bags piled around them. Homeless, unhoused, vagrants, the dispossessed, whatever you chose to call them, flocked to beach towns up and down the coast. Looking to camp out just like these people.

Beach towns attracted men and women down on their luck. The idea of sleeping free on the beach and accosting tourists with lots of loose change created a tempting combination. These dunes had lots of vegetation, easy to hide a camp.

Back in Hermosa Beach, the walking and bike trail, the Strand, looked nothing like this. Nature was distinctly absent from the South Bay even though the sea lapped for miles along its edge. It was all concrete with multi-million-dollar houses on one side crowded right up to the sidewalk and on the other, flat stretches of sand down to the sea. No trees. No shade. No dogs allowed. On the beach, that is. Flowers and shrubs were usually prisoners in big containers on luxury patios packed with lounge chairs from high-end stores.

Here, oaks and groves of eucalyptus and cypress flourished right along the road and the rec trail. High dunes were crowned with fragrant brush, wildflowers, and thorny bushes.

Nessa pointed ahead where she could see a wharf at the end of the curved beach. “Is that Fisherman’s Wharf,” she asked Bob.

He shook his head. “Commercial wharf, Yacht harbor, couple of restaurants. The tourist trap ya’ll are referrin’ to is beyond. On the other side of the Customs House Plaza.”

Their conversation was sporadic with lots of stops and starts as people approached or passed them. The trail was obviously popular with dog walkers. This created problems because aside from

having a cat walking on a harness, even a very ugly cat, the dogs immediately wanted to throw themselves at Pim's feet and declare lifelong friendship with the invisible feline. Dogs could see through the curse and they loved him. Without exception. Pim loved the dogs right back. Nessa had yet to see Pim meet a dog he couldn't charm.

Their owners were all surprised, thinking the dogs were trying to meet Bob. Because why would their canine pals be falling all over themselves in doggy ecstasy to an apparently empty space?

Luckily a cat in a harness was a great distraction for the humans. At first Bob would bring squeals of surprise from other walkers starting with, "Oh look at the kitty." Until they got a good look at him. Smiles quickly shifted to sympathetic looks with the walkers invariably asking, "Oh dear, what happened."

Nessa shrugged, and answered, "He's a rescue."

Close enough to the truth probably.

Because of the frequent pauses, it was a slow walk to the wharf. Near the wharf, they passed a large plaza and all three stopped.

Magic buzzed beneath their feet. Hot and sharp edged.

Pim growled softly.

"Over there's Custom House Plaza," Bob said in his slow drawl. "Somethin's goin' on. Ya'll feel it?"

"Oh, heck yes," said Nessa as Pim meowed in agreement.

Bob sniffed, "*Hmmn*. Let's keep on walkin' to the Wharf. We'll come back and have a look see."

"I don't want to have a look see," she told Bob, eyeing the plaza suspiciously. "We're on vacation."

"You're here to take care of me little miss, and I'm going to have a look see at the Plaza. *Comprendé?*" and he stalked off, pulling Nessa with him.

He wasn't wrong. Technically Fionna's cousin had brought them to Monterey to look after Bob in her absence.

No one had mentioned a talking cat who seemed to consider himself the cowpoke sheriff of this town.

Next to the plaza was a desert-landscaped garden with cacti and succulents and next to the garden, historical adobes with a plaque. Nessa paused to read it. The buildings dated from when Monterey was part of Mexico and had been taken over by the Americans when they forcibly moved in.

"Customs House," said Bob shortly. "Nothin' to see. Come on."

Panhandlers crowded an open esplanade in front of the historical buildings and the entrance to the wharf. A few shabby vendors sold tie-dye shirts and alpaca *whatevers*.

A sign at the entrance said pets weren't allowed on the wharf. Nessa took off the cat carrier, unstrapped Bob's leash and waited while he settled himself inside. It took all of Nessa's strength to heave the big cat in its carrier back onto her shoulders. She groaned but set off. At least in this position, Bob could whisper comments in her ear. Not that he didn't still draw attention.

Nearly everyone had some comment to make. Though none of them included 'pretty kitty.'

Pim padded happily along not bound by the no-animal rules. He could go anywhere he wanted. He strutted a little ahead of her, tail and head high.

Nessa had been to Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco with her dad. Monterey's was on a far smaller scale. Only about a block long, a single center path with restaurants and tourist shops on both sides. A candy store sold all the normal stuff including saltwater taffy. Pim made a choking sound and Nessa laughed. They both hated the stuff.

The storefronts, restaurants, and lamp posts were festively decorated for the Halloween season. Plenty of scarecrows, hay bales, black cats, witches' brooms, and carved pumpkins big and small. None of the pumpkins called out cryptic warnings in either Spanish or English. For which Nessa was grateful.

Black and orange ribbons were everywhere. The decorations were all welcoming and family friendly. She saw at least a dozen posters advertising the Halloween Hexapalooza festival, like the one by the shuttle bus stop.

Despite being a weekday afternoon, the wharf was crowded. Families, dozens of kids, babies in strollers, couples, and groups of people crowded the walkway speaking English, Spanish, Chinese, a smattering of French and German, and several other languages. Monterey was a tourist town, and the Fisherman's Wharf really showed it.

Wait staff manned outdoor stands piled high with ice in front of most restaurants. Gorgeous sample dishes from their menus, and stroll-and-go snacks for sale like shrimp cocktail, oysters on the half shell with sliced lemon, and creamy Boston style clam chowder. Many offered free samples of the chowder.

Pim kept popping up on his hind legs to sniff energetically.

Pim liked chowder.

They had money from Harper's generous food budget she'd left for them.

"Would you like a bowl of chowder?" she said to Bob over her shoulder. She didn't need to ask Pim, she already knew his answer.

"Mighty kind," he whispered, his whiskers tickling her ear.

Nessa and dairy products did not always get along. Better not to take a chance.

She got two take-out bowls of chowder and a fat lobster roll for herself along with a couple of bags of chips and a chocolate chip cookie. They hadn't had lunch, and she was hungry.

Carrying their food carefully down the wharf, she looked for a secluded spot to sit. Soup being lapped by an invisible cat was not a magic trick she wanted to explain. Also, Bob would have to come out of his carrier to eat.

She found a narrow lane between two of the restaurants leading to a row of benches along the wharf railing overlooking a quiet inlet with a small beach and low rocky cliffs full of flowers, plants, and pines. A pair of kayakers were paddling lazily around the calm waters. The rec trail they'd been walking on bordered the beach, stretching out of sight into a grove of trees.

Setting the cups of chowder down, with her sandwich to one side, she held the bowls steady so the cats could eat.

Pim licked and chewed murmuring little chirps and meows of pure pleasure.

Bob ate silently with quiet determination.

When both cats had finished their soup and were methodically licking fur and whiskers back into place, Nessa picked up her sandwich. She took out a piece of lobster and offered it to Pim, he shook his head pointing to his pleasantly plump tummy. She held it out to Bob. He, too, shook his head.

Smiling happily to herself, she began to eat. At this moment she really felt like she was on vacation. A secluded corner by the sea with a very different coastline than the one she now called home. Lobster, French bread, and a tinglingly sweet sauce filled her mouth. A cool breeze off the water tugged her hair out of her face. New sights. New sounds.

Pim rubbed against her knee, sensing her happiness.

Bob looked out at the bay, his eyes following the kayakers paddling beyond the moored boats.

What an enigma the talking cat was, Nessa thought.

She split open the two small bags of chips so they could all enjoy the crunchy snacks.

"Hey, Bob?" she asked.

The cat twitched his good ear to show he was listening.

"What brought you to Monterey? Were you born here?"

He laughed. A dry, wheezy sound, ending in what Nessa would have called a smokers' cough if he'd been human.

"Born here? Not likely. Arkansas. Home of Razor Back Pigs and lots of corn. Nowhere town from nowhere people. Went down to Texas in my youth. Ridin' rough, good with a gun. Real handy as a matter of fact." He heaved a deep sigh, rocking back to stretch out his front paws. "Miss them."

"Guns?" Nessa asked, raising her eyebrows.

He looked up at her, "Thumbs," he replied with a sneer. At least Nessa thought it was a sneer. His twisted mouth made it hard to read his expressions. Anyone who thinks cats' faces aren't expressive has never owned a cat.



“Were you a gunslinger?” she asked, finishing her sandwich and wiping her lips with a paper napkin.

“Not so to speak.” He shifted his position on the bench to face her. “Joined the U.S. Marshals. Stayed with them a long time. On the right side of the law. In my later years I became a bounty hunter. Good money huntin’ bad men.”

“Meow!” said Pim, putting a paw on Nessa’s thigh.

“Yes. Meow for reals. Pim and I are bounty hunters,” she told him, pointing to herself and her Familiar. She decided to leave out the part about being forced into it because of Deadbeat Dad’s debt. “We work for Roman Barracuda, Barracuda Bail Bonds, in Los Angeles.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Bob gave her a slow once over with his one good eye. “You shoot ‘em? Cause you sure couldn’t lift ‘em. Scrawny thing like you.”

Nessa made a face at the talking cat. “It’s not 1850, you know. We don’t go around shooting bail jumpers.”

Bob twitched his long whiskers. “Don’t you? Seems like more people getting shot these days than when I was...” the cat paused, giving a languorous stretch, his back arched. “Well, when I walked around on two legs. Anyways, the bounties I was chasing brought me further and further west until I ended up here. California had been taken from Mexico by then. Brought a bad man in to the Alcalde. Here in Monterey, they call the mayor Alcalde. Left over from the Spanish days. He was sheriff too, back then. Handed over the wanted poster and damn if they didn’t take the man out and hang him as I stood there. No trial nor nothing. Just strung him up and dropped the fellow off the second-floor porch of Colton Hall.”

Nessa and Pim exchanged horrified glances.

“Jeezus,” she breathed.

“Jesus indeed.” Bob shook his head slowly. “Doubt he would have approved. Rough justice back then. Real rough.”

Nessa didn’t know what to say. The terrible image filling her mind’s eye.

Pim gave himself a thorough shake, whiskers to tail.

Nessa knew her Familiar had seen much worse than hanging. Pim was with the Chevalier family when they fled France during the terror of the revolution. Barely escaping the Guillotine, crossing the Channel to England and safety. Or as safe as witches could be during the 1700s.

‘Wait a second,’ Nessa thought. She’d seen that name somewhere. Colton Hall. Colton Hall. She snapped her fingers making Bob and Pim look at her. The posters by the airport shuttle and on the wharf.

“Colton Hall,” she said.

“What of it,” Bob said. “Dark place. Lots of ghosts.”

“The Halloween Festival is being held there. On Halloween. Tomorrow. In front of Colton Hall.”

Bob made a choking sound. “What? Where?”

“Halloween Festival. Hexapalooza.” Nessa thought back to what she’d read. “First one. You know, first time for the festival. Food, games, and live music, entertainment. You need a ticket to get in.”

Nessa broke off part of the chocolate chip cookie, handing it to Pim.

He held the morsel with his front paws, biting off a chocolatey chunk.

Nessa did the same. It was good. Soft and chewy. Exactly how she liked them.

“On Halloween? The thirty-first? Colton Hall?” Bob repeated.

Nessa nodded; her mouth full of cookie.

Pim looked at Bob, cocking his head to one side. They both heard the troubled tone in Bob’s voice.

“What’s wrong with any of that?” Nessa asked once she’d swallowed her bite of cookie.

“What’s wrong is Colton Hall is haunted. They used to hang men from the second floor like I just said. Not enough of a drop for a quick death most times. Terrible way to die. They hung some bad ‘uns and their ghosts never left. Gettin’ them all excited with a fiesta? Not a good idea. Not a good idea at all. No wonder it’s got the pumpkin by the front door all riled up. Mal Paso? I guess so.”

Just then a couple strolled down the alley, passing Nessa and Bob. They gave Bob a curious glance, smiling at Nessa before moving a little away to lean on the fence and admire the view.

Time to move on.

Bob jumped back in the cat carrier. Nessa finished her cookie, picked up their trash, and they returned to the main part of the Wharf.

As they walked, Bob whispered, “This here buzz of magic has me worried. Not normal. Nope. Not at all. We need to go by City Hall, Colton Hall. Walk past the Customs House to the plaza, I’ll tell you how to get there. It ain’t far.”

Nessa nodded she understood.

“I may not be the law,” he continued quietly speaking in her ear, “but I keep an eye on this dang town. Talkin’ pumpkins is bad enough. A party on Halloween at the already haunted place? No thank you. This has to be related to what they dug up a week or so back. Brought something into the light they shouldn’t have.”

Pim meowed, a growl rumbling in his throat.

Nessa wanted to growl too. What had they gotten themselves into now?

## CHAPTER FIVE

That they had gotten themselves in trouble became all too clear far too soon.

Once they left Fisherman's Wharf, Nessa put Bob back on the ground, breathing a sigh of relief. The talking cat was no lightweight. Following his lead, they headed back to the large open plaza by the historic adobes. The plaza opened onto some kind of local museum, cafes, and what looked like boutiques on a pedestrian walkway.

At the edge of the plaza, Bob jumped a good three feet in the air, yanking Nessa forward with the leash. Her right foot shot out for balance, stepping into the plaza.

She leaped back with a squeal of surprise. Pins and needles shot through her foot racing around her toes and up her calves with burning speed.

"Ow, ow, ow," she chanted jumping up and down. She dropped the leash to rub the sudden cramp in her calf.

Several tourists nearby stared, a child across the plaza pointed before being pulled away by an adult.

Pim had been a step behind her. He froze, hackles up, his back arched as high as one of the Halloween black cat decorations on the wharf,

Nessa grimaced from the pins and needles racing through the toes of her right foot.

Two cats and one human all exchanged looks of understanding.

"Mal Paso," said Nessa under her breath. "Guess this is where it starts. Or ends. One or the other."

They tested it following the stinging sensation around the plaza as far as they could without actually entering.

Watching every step, they discovered the Mal Paso covered the entire plaza and most of the pedestrian walkway. Outside the plaza, the spelled path didn't stretch all the way from side to side. It left a narrow band free directly in front of the shops.

They skirted the magic, cautiously moving forward, keeping close to the shops like vampires hugging the shadows as the sun comes up. Their path took them past a hotel and the Convention Center. Nessa knew it was the Convention Center because of the big sign announcing the building's purpose. The path ended at an intersection with a traffic light.

"Alvarado," Bob said tersely when no one was around. "City's main street."

Unfortunately, once across the street, the Mal Paso blossomed, branching out to the sidewalk on both sides. Through trial and error, with Nessa suddenly jumping like a lunatic when her foot strayed into the stinging magic, they found a narrow spell-free line next to the curb on the right side of Alvarado.

When she wasn't watching her footing, Nessa looked at the buildings along the main street. Most didn't look historic except for a couple of places. Most probably dated from the sixties or a little before. A couple were pretty with fancy facades and scrollwork. It reminded Nessa a little of Brand Avenue in Glendale, though Alvarado was on a much smaller scale. Most of the businesses were local with only a couple of chains like Starbucks and Taco Bell.

If her trio of taco-loving fairies showed up, they'd be happy. They loved anything with salsa.

Nessa's chest constricted at the thought. Please God, don't let them show up. The last thing she and Pim wanted to do was wrangle three flighty fairies in an unfamiliar town over the Halloween weekend.

Panhandlers crouched here and there along the street with their cardboard signs and identical chorus of "Spare change?"

Small knots of noisy teens passed her one after the other. Unaffected by the magic. Or fashion, apparently. They were dressed almost exclusively in dark colors, boys and girls. Talking too loudly, taking up too much room. She checked her phone. After three. School must have just gotten out.

Shade trees wrapped in fairy lights lined both sides of the street. To avoid the Mal Paso, she and Bob and Pim had to step into the street whenever they came to one of the trees. She didn't need a talking cat to have people think she was weird. Her winding path along the sidewalk made her look loony enough.

They passed an old theater complete with an oversized lighted sign board over the street. The kind with plastic removable letters to announce what was playing. This one looked like it had been renovated into a concert venue. The signboard had names of older musical groups or singers Nessa recognized thanks to her classic rock education from Dad.

Two blocks in, they approached a cheerful sidewalk patio filled with diners from the adjacent restaurant. Nessa felt a prickling sensation on the back of her neck that had nothing to do with the Mal Paso. The feeling quickly spread down her arms to her fingertips. The sensation never meant good things.

Your inner self instinctively knows when someone is staring. Nessa's eyes zeroed in on the happy diners to find three pairs of eyes laser-focused on her. Three women, very different in size and coloring, but each with the same frown and intent stare. Three glasses of deep red wine were held up by manicured fingers as if the women were distracted by something at the same time. Or rather, someone.

Nessa.

She kept walking but met their eyes, her face impassive. They were giving off sparks, little indivisible bursts of magical energy going off like Pop Rocks candy.

They were making it clear they had recognized Nessa as a supernatural. But why the death stares? Maybe this was their town, their Coven's, and they thought Nessa was trying to move in.

These women were mature, confident looking, and from the buzz Nessa felt head to toe, powerful. While she was...well, herself. Not particularly intimidating. Five foot three, blond hair falling to her shoulders, clear blue eyes (thanks to her contacts), even features, not particularly pretty but not hideous, wearing canvas Chuck sneakers, loose jeans, a white tee, and faded Old Navy zip hoody, walking a very ugly cat on a leash and with her invisible Familiar.

Could they feel she was an Elemental? Coven witches generally shunned Elementals because of their connection to Faerie. Elementals were more Fae than human if they survived to puberty. Coven witches didn't like the otherworld connection. From what her dad had told her, Coven Witches considered Elementals Wild Cards. Unpredictable. Untethered to this world. Despite being able to call on one of the natural forces keeping the earth spinning.

Nessa thought this exceedingly unfair. How much more 'natural' could a witch get then summoning earth, air, fire, or water?

Pim had his back up. He was carefully watching the women.

Nessa was going to ignore them. Walk past. After all, Monterey was not her town.

Bob had other ideas.

He pulled against the leash, planting himself resolutely in front of the women's table. Nessa gave an experimental tug, but he stayed put.

The women shifted their gaze from Nessa to Bob. They looked even more stern. Their mouths pinched; their eyes narrowed to slits.

Bob sat back on his haunches, ignoring the flood of comments from other diners as they noticed the large ugly cat. He picked up on paw and curling his toe pads into a very un-catlike move, made the 'I'm watching you' motion from his good eye to the women and back again. He then spit, turned his back on the group, and stalked off, pulling Nessa with him.

Nessa couldn't ask the cat anything. Too many people around. He pulled against the leash, urging her to walk faster. She let him lead having no idea where they were going.

After another block or two they crossed an intersection and went round a corner. The Mal Paso took the same path.

"Wait," she said, pulling back on the leash.

There was no one around.

Squatting down she asked, "What the heck was that about? With the women."

Bob wrinkled his nose, speaking quietly, "Local Coven. Sell their services. Mostly dark stuff. Quiet like. Harper don't like them," he gave a wheezy laugh. "Nope. Not one bit. And they feel the same way if you get my meaning."

"Are they enemies? The Coven Witches and Harper?"

Bob cocked his head to one side considering her question, "You might say so. Not fist fights in the street sort of fightin' but dang near close recently."

Fionna used dark magic; Nessa knew for a fact. Manipulating energy for her own gain and hurting others was precisely what had gotten the entitled witch into trouble with the Infernal Court to begin with.

"Does Harper have a coven?" Nessa asked.

Bob snorted so hard he gave himself a coughing fit. Nessa patted him on the back and waited until he could speak again.

"No, no, no," he wheezed. "The girl's a Garde. Not a Sunday-go-to-meetin' sort of a witch as we used to say. Them Gardes is lone wolves or work together as a family pack. Never with outsiders. But she don't take commissions, if you get my drift. You can't hire her to hex someone or curse a business." He wheezed out another laugh, "She'll do the hexin' all on her own if you rile her up."

Nessa and Pim exchanged knowing looks. His description of a Garde witch sounded a lot like Fionna. She looked out for number one, herself, first and foremost. Guess it ran in the Garde family.

"Come on," Bob said, pulling hard on the leash, urging her on. "We got to check on Stokes."

"Who's Stokes?" Nessa asked.

Bob didn't answer. She broke into a trot to keep him from pulling the leash out of her grip. He was one strong cat.

Pim ran beside him.

They approached a large two-story Spanish-style building. Adobe with a traditional tile roof. Much bigger than the Customs House back by Fisherman's Wharf. The property was beautifully landscaped with flowering shrubs and massive old-growth oaks towering over the roof. A sign in front announced the name and hours of the restaurant.

"Stokes Adobe," Bob said over his shoulder, regardless of several people passing near.

"Are we stopping?" Nessa asked. "Is Stokes important?"

They didn't stop. The Mal Paso was still going as well.

Bob halted abruptly at a walled garden a little distance from the rear of the refurbished adobe. The street in front was partially blocked with orange hazard cones and flashing lights. A hole stood near the sewer grate and the sidewalk had been torn up all the way to the wall.

"Dang it to hell, I knew it." Bob spit out the words. "I knew it."

Nessa tested the edge of the hole by one of the cones with the toe of her shoe and was met by a painful shock. Jumping away, she stepped onto more of the path going in a different direction. The Mal Paso didn't end here either. Instead, the spell appeared to branch off in yet another direction.

"I am really tired of this stupid path," she said to Pim, standing in the street.

Pim licked a sore paw, meowing in agreement.

Meanwhile, Bob kept hissing and spitting and cursing in a hoarse feline whisper.

“Bob,” Nessa shushed, “people coming.”

A woman with gray hair and rainbow patterned sweater approached, “Is your cat okay?” she asked, her face full of concern.

“He’s fine,” Nessa assured her. “Stuck his nose into something and has a fit of the sneezes.”

Bob, taking the cue, sneezed several times.

“He’s fine,” Nessa said again.

The woman stared at the admittedly ugly cat, taking in his single eye, twisted mouth, the knotted stubby tail and patches of missing fur. “He doesn’t look fine...” she trailed off.

“Oh, he’s all right.” Nessa bent down to stroke Bob. “He can’t help the way he looks but he’s still my little fur baby,” she crooned in a sickly-sweet voice. “Precious little kitty.”

Bob gagged and she heard Pim quietly snickering.

The woman’s face warmed. “Absolutely. Love them forever. No matter what.”

“No matter what,” Nessa echoed.

With a wave, and “Have a good day,” the woman moved on.

While they waited until the street was empty Pim sniffed all around the garden.

Once the street was clear Nessa said, “Explain, Bob. What’s going on because something is obviously wrong here.”

“Stokes.”

“Stokes. Stokes. Stokes. Stokes *what?*” She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “You keep muttering about this person. I’m not from here. I don’t understand.”

Bob sat. After a quick check of the street, he spoke. “Told you I came here in the 1850s.”

Nessa nodded. She remembered.

“Was on All Hollow’s Eve I lost it all. I’d been out drinkin’ and doin’...” he paused to give Nessa the side eye. “Uh...man stuff. I was more than three sheets to the wind as they say. Drunk as a skunk but still mobile. It was late. Streets quiet. I came by the Customs House and saw a man had a woman down on her knees, one hand round her throat. The woman cried out for help. Hell, she didn’t have to ask twice. I never passed by a woman in trouble and I never would.

Pulled out my gun and told him to let go of her. That’s when I saw his eyes were shinin’ bright as gas lamps. I didn’t recognize him. His face was all twisted up. I tell you; I didn’t hesitate. Shot him in the chest. Twice. He let go the woman and I told her to run.

Then damn me, the man got back up. Stood with two of my bullets in his chest. His face didn’t even look human. I raised my gun to shoot again when a burst of light as bright as the sun hit me. I felt

like I was on fire and then...nothing. Only darkness. When I woke up, cause wake up I did, didn't take me long to realize he'd taken my life. I was nothing but a specter. It was a while before I realized he'd taken my soul as well."

Nessa and Pim listened to his story with their mouths hanging open.

This Stokes person had to be a Soul Eater. Nessa had encountered one too many Soul Eaters recently. Nasty, murdering magic users. She'd done some research following those battles and learned what happened to their victims *after* they lost their soul. It was far worse than being murdered. Without their souls, the people couldn't 'cross over' as the saying goes. Their bodies fell to dust, trapping their spirits for eternity in this world. There was, however, one caveat to the deadly magic. If the specter found a supernatural at the point of death, their spirit could jump into the body and live again. Bob must have found a dying supernatural cat and used the magic to take up residence.

Bob explained James Stokes had renamed the refurbished Adobe they'd just seen. The building had originally been commissioned around 1833 by Ambrose Tomlinson. Tomlinson sold it to Stokes. Stokes was an army deserter posing as a pharmacist and doctor.

"Rumor is he was what people nowadays call a serial killer. Pretended to treat patients then killed them. Lots of 'em. Stokes supposedly died before I got here. Folks said it was a natural death." Bob hissed and spit. "Weren't nothing natural about the man. No sir. Faked his death, made a deal with a demon, and started collecting souls. Eventually mine included."

Bob began pacing around the construction site.

"And you're upset about this hole because?" Nessa prompted.

"Dang construction. They must have disturbed the grave."

"Meow?" questioned Pim.

"Grave?" said Nessa.

"Stokes ain't at the Stokes Adobe. Plenty of other ghosts there, just not his. He ain't buried in the cemetery neither."

Nessa pointed at the construction site. "And this?"

Bob sat. "Is where he is. Lots of good witches in this world. Lots. By the time I found this body," he gestured at his feline self, "and got back here to Monterey, a group of Elementals..." He glanced up at her, "Like you, you know?"

"I do," Nessa said without elaborating.

"A group of Elemental witches trapped him in a demon circle right in the garden on the other side of the wall." He indicated the garden. "Buried him in a hole deep and wide. Those witches created vessels holding all four elements, earth, air, fire, and water. At the four corners they buried those jars, laying down a web of incantation to keep him from risin' again."



“Oh crap,” Nessa sighed, realizing what must have happened. “The construction is by his grave.”

“Worse. Unhook me,” Bob said, wriggling. “I need to have a look around.”

She unlatched the lease and waited. Pim went with him, tail high, whiskers and ears alert.

Bob sniffed around the area, careful to stay clear of the Mal Paso.

“They been doing road work all over town the past couple of years,” Bob told them. “Diggin’ up the streets, laying new pipes, etcetera, etcetera. Guess it was only a matter of time.”

“They broke through all the way to his grave?”

“Not quite, but nearly as bad. One of the Vessels was outside the wall. Right here.” He pointed to the sidewalk. “Wall came later, you know? By breaking the Vessel, they cracked the magic circle keeping his spirit...what do you call it...when they can’t move or nothin’?”

“Dormant?” ventured Nessa.

“That’s it. Dormant. Woke the monster up.”

“Is he free?” Nessa looked nervously around as if she might see him hovering, ready to pounce.

“Not yet, I’d feel it in my bones if he was out. Even in this here feline form. Killed me and took my soul. We are tied together so to speak.”

Were they ever. Soul mates in the worse way. Just like Frank the Fallen Angel felt an unbreakable link to Nessa’s soul because of his deal with her mother.

“He’s awake. Testin’ his limits probably,” Bob said, shaking his head and twisting his knotted tail. “I’m guessing he made contact with the Coven through one of their damn seances or some such soon as the Vessel broke. Presented them with an offer if they freed him.”

“You think waking up this Stokes guy is what the Mal Paso is for?”

“Got to be part of it. What doesn’t kill you...”

“Makes you stronger,” finished Nessa.

Bob snorted derisively. “Will come back and kill you later.”

Nessa gave him a horrified look.

“If you don’t make sure it stays dead,” he finished with a twist of his tail. “They didn’t make sure old Stokes would stay dead. He’s trapped but he ain’t gone. Come on. Let’s check out old Colton Hall.”

Colton Hall was close enough to Stokes’s containment grave and the Mal Paso to make Nessa nervous. It didn’t take a magical genius to realize dark magic was awake in this pretty tourist town.

“Wait here,” Bob said stopping a few feet away from an enormous lawn leading to the two-story building. “The Mal Paso’s probably got the ghosts stirred up. Can you see any?”

She could. Several phantom shapes were floating in front of the hall like smoke. Blurry and indistinct but there. They must be pretty strong specters for her to see them. Nessa didn’t see all ghosts. Thankfully. Not like her Aunt Emerald. But she saw more than enough for her.

“What about uniforms? Any of ‘em in uniform?” Bob asked.

Nessa shook her head, “Can’t tell. Blurry shapes at best.”

“Trust me. Those are some of the soldiers they hung from the balcony. Deserters and the like.”

Nessa searched on her cell phone for Colton Hall. Clicking on a website, she held it low so Pim could read as well.

Building started in 1847, finished in 1849. Eighteen forty-seven? Only a year after the U.S. claimed Monterey. They didn’t waste any time.

She read on, built in the Greek revival style and supposed to be a school first.

She looked up squinting at the white two-story building with a critical eye. It had a sloped roof, two columns at the top of a split staircase in a triangle shape.

“I guess it’s sort of Greek Revival,” she said to Pim. “Minus the symmetry and number of columns.”

Pim shook his head, frowning and exposing his sharp little teeth.

They both liked architecture and had studied different common styles but most especially house styles. Dreaming of the home Nessa probably would never have.

“‘A’ for effort I guess,” she said, making a face.

“What the hell are you two muttering about?” Bob snapped. “Who cares what style it’s in. Dang thing is haunted. Mal Paso ends here and they’re having a party!” he spat the last word in disgust. “A party for gods sakes. We’re doomed.”

There were tents up already and a stage. The poster promised entertainment and live music all day.

Halloween banners decorated the front of the building. Fairy lights, probably in orange and purple, were strung on both balustrades of the ‘A’ shaped staircases leading to the second floor.

“I’m going to go and talk to them,” Nessa declared. “Get some details.”

“Details are a bunch of people are probably going to die,” muttered Bob irritably. He followed her, though.

The irritating background buzz of the Mal Paso appeared to end at the wide brick walkway bisecting the lawn leading to Colton Hall. Lawn didn’t actually do the expanse of green justice. It was more the size of a park with trees and trim shrubs and bushes around the ends. No wonder they’d chosen this as the setting for the Halloween festival. Hundreds of people could attend and not feel crowded.

A shoulder-high fence of green netting surrounded both sides of the lawn. Since it was a ticketed event, they’d need to keep the grounds enclosed.

Pim easily leaped over the fence, running ahead to see what he could sniff out.

“Unhook me,” Bob said in a commanding tone.

Nessa unclipped the leash.

To Nessa's surprise, Bob did the same as Pim. Easily managing the high jump despite his bulk. He trotted off.

Since jumping the fence was not an option, Nessa approached the walkway from the side, careful not to step on the Mal Paso. She successfully executed a little sideways jump to take her over the border of the enchanted path and onto the bricks.

Walking up the path, she spied one of the openings for tomorrow's guests. Since the festival hadn't started, it was unguarded. She boldly walked through. All around her the park was bustling with workers setting out tables, putting up decorations, and stringing cables. On the stage someone was doing sound checks with the microphones and speakers. One person was tying a colorful wizard's cloak around a life-sized Grizzly Bear statue. The statue already wore a black witch's hat.

Nessa decided to approach a young woman stringing lights around the outside of a large tent.

"Hi," she said in a cheerful voice, smiling widely. "I just arrived in Monterey. My first time. Can I get tickets for the festival online? I need a ticket to attend, right?"

The woman, wearing coveralls, a long-sleeved tee shirt, her black hair braided into pigtails, paused in her work.

"Not online, no," she said, smiling back. "And yes, you need a ticket to come in. Kids under six are free but still need a ticket. They're only three dollars, it's just for crowd control, you know?"

Nessa nodded.

"There are a few ticket booths around town. Like up at the mall and stuff. Since you're already here..." The woman pointed toward Colton Hall. "See the little gingerbread house over there. It's the main ticket booth."

Nessa followed her pointing finger and did indeed see a garish, wooden hut covered in brightly colored candy cutouts on the right side of the hall's double staircase.

Despite or maybe because of the bright colors and realistic oversized candy, the hut gave off ominous Hansel and Gretel vibes.

"They're open until five," the woman said. "You can get your tickets at the window."

Thanking her, Nessa walked to the ticket booth, stopping a few yards away as the buzz of magic resonating through the ground grew stronger. The energy felt similar to the Mal Paso though it didn't sting or slap as hard.

Bob and Pim rejoined her.

Kneeling to refasten Bob's leash, she whispered, "Is it my imagination or is the magic getting stronger the closer we get to the ticket booth?"

"Meow," said Pim in a firm voice.

“If your cat is sayin’ ‘hell yes’, then he is correct,” added Bob, eyeing the ticket booth with a feline frown.

A young woman stood inside the decorated stand surrounded by carved jack o’ lanterns, hay bales and two scary looking pumpkin-headed scarecrows on either side of the ticket window. More scarecrows stood on both sides of the entrance to the stairways. All were dressed in plaid shirts and baggy jeans, kerchiefs around their necks and large black ragged looking witches hats. Their arms were wired to look like they were reaching for you.

Their pumpkin heads were carved with snarling jagged teeth and their eyes had black glass set into the eye holes.

With a shiver, Nessa stared harder at the scarecrows. They seemed to be looking back.

Not what Nessa would characterize as family friendly. Creep factor off the charts.

The young woman at the ticket window narrowed her eyes at Nessa and Bob’s approach.

“I’d like,” Nessa began.

“Sold out,” the girl said, cutting her off before she could finish the sentence.

“But...”

“No tickets for you or the cat,” she said almost defiantly and with that, the girl slammed the wooden partition to the window shut with a *bang*.

The bang was followed by the *snick* of a bolt sliding home.

The three of them moved away from the booth before speaking.

“Are witches selling the tickets?” Nessa asked, looking back over her shoulder at the booth.

Pim gave an assertive, “Meow, meow, *meow*.”

She hadn’t been wrong about the Hansel and Gretel vibes. There really was a wicked witch inside.

“Old Stokes’s spirit is in league with them witches,” Bob said in an angry whisper. “I will lay you odds.”

Nessa didn’t really know enough about the situation to say for certain, still it seemed an improbable coincidence. The Mal Paso had witch magic written all over it.

Pim gave a low growl. With a start of surprise, she realized the ghosts she’d seen from afar had come into focus. Soldiers, like Bob thought. In faded uniforms. They were coming closer.

“I think we should leave,” she announced, turning on her heel and tugging Bob’s leash. “Now.”

Pim stayed behind her, walking backwards to keep an eye on the ghosts.

The ghosts followed until they reached the edge of the lawn. There, they abruptly stopped as if running into an invisible wall.

A wall Nessa felt was going to fall on All Hallows Eve.



## CHAPTER SIX

Wrapped in a blanket, Nessa and Pim sat on the big couch in the townhouse living room eating popcorn. Bob perched in one of a pair of elegant green wingback chairs facing them.

In the other chair sat a ghost. A girl ghost in a white lace dress, her hands demurely clasped in her lap.

After leaving haunted Colton Hall, Nessa decided it was a good time to use some of the Shared Ride credits Harper had left. After a quick detour to a nearby Trader Joes, courtesy of Bob's directions, they grabbed supplies for dinner, snacks, and breakfast. Nessa and Pim also picked out a little bouquet of flowers for their All Hallows altar to Grandma' Hattie plus some chocolate peanut butter cups and yogurt-dipped strawberries for her.

Supplies in hand, they hopped in the back seat of the Ride Share for the short drive to Harper's.

"*Mal Paso...*" the pumpkin started to say as Nessa unlocked the door.

"Oh shut up!" she snapped. "We know! Okay? Mal freaking Paso!"

Pim gave the pumpkin a whack with one paw, nearly toppling it over.

Oh man, this was not the holiday she and Pim had been hoping for.

And now a ghost had come to call.

The blanket was necessary because the ghost girl brought the temperature in the room down by at least ten degrees. Nessa could see her breath.

Everyone sat silently staring at each other after Nessa had allowed the girl inside with Bob's permission. This was his and Harper's home and their Threshold Wards after all.

The red plastic Speak and Spell was on the couch, set on a wooden tray Nessa found in one of the kitchen cupboards to make it steadier for Pim's paws. Pim needed to be a part of this conversation.

Bob was fascinated by the device. As well he should be. It was an impressive little machine.

Pim had his paws poised over the chunky keys. They'd been discussing the Mal Paso and the ominous atmosphere of the upcoming Halloween Hexapalooza when the girl appeared at the window startling them all.

Bob had sworn like a sailor before stomping over to stand up on his hind legs and stare at the newcomer.

The ghost raised a hand in greeting.

She was a slim little thing. Younger than Nessa by several years. Maybe thirteen or fourteen? Her long dark hair was pulled back and tied with a white satin ribbon. Her white dress fell to her ankles, belted at the waist, with a high ruffled neck and eyelet ruffles at the sleeves. Thin face with even features,

thick brows, and large eyes. Since the majority of ghosts seemed stuck in grayscale, Nessa couldn't tell what color her eyes were or whether her hair was black or brown.

After a time, Bob growled, "Open the door, let's ask her what the devil she wants."

Nessa, shadowed by Pim who seemed ready to transform to his werecat form at any sign of trouble, unlocked the door, opening it a crack.

"Hey. Hi," Nessa said hesitantly.

The girl's eyes got impossibly large. "H...Hola. Hello. You can see me, too?" stuttered the girl, floating back a little.

Oh, crap. Nessa could almost never 'hear' specters. See them, yes. Hear them, no. Aunt Emerald was the ghost whisperer in the Scott family. Other people called it a gift. Not how Nessa would describe it.

Was hearing this ghost a good thing or bad for them?

"Meow," said Pim suspiciously.

"Yes, I can see you," Nessa said, keeping her voice soft. "Do you need something?"

"*Mal Paso abierto*!" howled the pumpkin making Nessa jump a foot.

Pim spun into a somersault, transforming into a werecat in mid-leap.

"*Abierto*!" wailed the pumpkin.

The ghost flew backward at the sight of fierce werecat Pim, fangs bared, claws out.

"Eek," she squeaked.

"*Abierto*!" wailed the pumpkin.

"Rowr!" growled Pim.

"What the devil," shouted Bob stalking over.

"*Mal Paso...*" started the pumpkin.

Bob squeezed out the door to swat it, leaving four deep claw marks along one side. "*Calabaza estúpida! Cierra la boca!* Shut up ya' stupid pumpkin or I'll smash you. I swear to God."

The pumpkin shut up.

The ghostly girl bobbed up and down on the other side of the stairs, looking wide eyed.

"Well don't just float there. Get your ghostly self inside and stop wasting my time," Bob hissed.

Nessa saw the ghost's eyes dart to Pim. He was half in and half out of the doorway looking fierce.

"Pim," Nessa said, laying a hand on his head which was practically up to her waist when he was in this form, "Change back. She's no threat."

Pim growled low in his chest, sneezed once, and with a resigned gurgle of discontent, flipped back into a feline.

"There now," Nessa tried to sound reassuring. "You can come in. Tell us what you want."

Nodding, the ghost made to float through, only to stop at the door frame. Backing up, she tried again with the same result.

With a hiss of annoyance, Bob stomped back to the doorway. “*Omnes eam transiet*,” he growled.

The air around the door shimmered softly.

“Come on then,” the big cat said over his shoulder as he walked into the kitchen. “The spell should let you through the dang ward. I need a drink.”

The girl entered without problem this time. As she passed Nessa felt an icy chill.

Which is where they were now.

Pim chewed a mouthful of popcorn.

Bob had a small, wide mouthed glass of Kentucky Bourbon on the side table. He’d told Nessa where the bottle was and the glass. Also, how much to pour in.

Pim had watched with curious interest, jumping up on the counter to sniff at the drink as Nessa poured.

He hadn’t like what he smelled and was overcome with a fit of sneezing.

Bob was in charge of this household when his partner was gone. Plus, he was much older than Nessa. She felt she should let him take the lead.

After giving his drink a lingering lick, Bob said, “Well, girl, speak up. We ain’t got all night to sit here and shiver. What’s the story?”

The girl settled herself in the chair. “My name is Victoria Montez. I live downtown. Monterey is my home.”

She paused.

“If you just wanted to introduce your spectral self,” Bob sneered, “consider it done and get back downtown. Me and the guests got a plan of action to come up with.”

“To stop those *brujas malas*, the bad witches. Yes?” The ghost made a face, not waiting for an answer. “They want to cause trouble. Free the demon from his jail.”

“Demon?” asked Nessa, sitting up straighter. “What demon?”

“She means old Stokes,” Bob snapped. “What you think we were doing all afternoon?” He lapped up more Bourbon.

“Not really sure,” answered Nessa just as sharply. “Pim and I are supposed to be on holiday.”

“Hell you are,” objected Bob “What? You think you came here by accident?” He gave a wheezy laugh which shifted into a prolonged bout of coughing. When he could speak again, he said, “Exactly what kind of a witch are you?”

“Elemental. Air,” she answered. There was no reason not to tell the truth.



“Exactly,” he nodded, smoothing his whiskers with a paw. “It was Elementals who put that monster Stokes underground and it’s going to take an Elemental to keep him there.”

“But...” Nessa started to object.

“Ain’t no buts about it. You sure are not here by chance.”

“The Coven Witches, they are plotting on making trouble,” the young ghost said. “They made the Mal Paso. Bad energy. There is much bad energy in town. I do not like it.”

“Amen,” said Nessa, taking more popcorn. She was hungry and ready for some of the food they’d brought back from Trader Joe’s waiting to be popped into the microwave.

“Are you going to help?” the ghost asked.

Bob squinted at her, “If you mean with keeping Stokes in the ground. The answer is hell yes.”

Pim’s clever paws flew over the keys of the Speak and Spell. “Ashes from a yew tree have recently been spread around the garden where you say Stokes is buried. Also, Mugwort and Wormwood. Your Great Grandmother, Madam de Chevalier, taught me to recognize the scent of any tree that could aid or repel magic. The Yew aids in death magic and calling the dead. It can be used to bridge the gap between the physical and spiritual worlds.”

“They want to bring the son of a...” Bob paused, giving Nessa the side eye. “Gun. Son of a gun back.”

Pim growled, quietly but still a growl. “Do you think Fionna engineered this on purpose?” he typed.

“How?” said Nessa. “I mean...” she exhaled a long breath. “You know. I would not put it past her. Let’s call and find out.”

Grabbing her cell phone from the cushion next to her on the couch, Nessa tapped Fionna’s symbol to call.

It rang three times before going to voicemail.

“Call me back, goddamn it!” Nessa shouted in the phone before texting the same message to the other witch.

Speaking to Pim she said, “What do you think? This is going to go from bad to worse really fast. Do we stay and help or cut and run? This isn’t our town. Is it our fight?”

Bob started to cut in but Nessa flipped her hand up for him to be quiet, “This is between me and Pim right now. You are not my cat. Harper is not my family. And Monterey is not my town.”

Bob hunched his shoulders but closed his mouth. The fur standing up on his back showed he was making an effort not to comment.

Pim didn’t answer right away. He stared at the keyboard, thinking.

After what seemed like a long couple of minutes, Pim typed, “Whether Fionna planned this or not, we are here. You and I...” he paused before tapping the keys again, “we made a promise to look after Bob, remember.”

Oh man, she had totally done that.

“Yes, but,” Nessa started to protest.

“Yes, but nothing,” the synth voice scolded. Pim could put a lot of attitude into his typing. “Bob is going to fight whatever is coming on Halloween.”

“Dang right I am,” interrupted Bob with a harrumph.

“Precisely. We can’t leave him to do it alone. A promise is a promise.”

Crap. A promise in both the Fae and magical world is a binding contract. Break it at your peril. No wonder Harper had wanted to speak with her on Fionna’s cell and ‘confirm’ she would take care of Bob. The confirmation was a promise Nessa would not leave Bob to fend for himself.

‘To the best of her ability.’ She’d said those exact words. There was no choice. They had to stay. If Bob wanted to fight, they’d have to fight too, to protect him. And ‘to the best of her ability’ now included breaking the Mal Paso spell before it could hurt Bob.

Whether it was accident or fate, she often found herself in the wrong place at exactly the right time. For everyone else. Not for herself. This was one of those times.

Taking a deep breath, Nessa faced the ghost girl. “I’m Nessa. I don’t think you can see him, but my Familiar, Pim, is here with me. He’s the one using the keyboard.”

“Ahh, I wondered. No, I cannot see him beyond,” she made a round shape with her hands, “I don’t know how to say it in English. Fuzzy? A smoky spot?”

“Close enough,” said Nessa.

“Bob,” said the large cat.

“Mr. Bob,” acknowledged the ghost girl. “I know of you. You are quite famous among the ghosts here. Thank you for letting me in.”

“Talk,” Bob said shortly. “Let’s compare stories.”

Victoria’s explanation followed much of what they had learned today. The Mal Paso had been laid over the last week by a local coven. One Victoria did not like at all and, Nessa guessed, included the witches who stared daggers at them on Alvarado. Victoria also knew about Stokes waking up after the construction crew broke one of the Elemental Vessels keeping him prisoner.

“He cannot escape yet,” she told them. “He wishes help from the bad witches. He helped them with the Mal Paso.”

“And in return?” Bob asked. “What does he want from them?”

“They will destroy the other three vessels and free him. He is a *demonio*,” she swiftly made the sign of the cross, “a demon.”

Bob’s knotted tail twisted in agitated circles, “He is a demon. No doubt about it.”

Nessa thought about all they had discovered.

Pim began to type, and the female voice spoke, “The Mal Paso is designed to absorb energy from humans, since no supernatural can set foot on it. Maybe it’s guiding humans to the event on the lawn. The Halloween Party. Drawing them there.”

“Makes sense,” agreed Bob. “Pushing people. Guaranteeing a big crowd. Ticket sales.”

“But there’s more to this magic,” Pim typed. “Gathering people creates energy, yes. However, the witches need real power to break the spell from the remaining three vessels holding...”

“Stokes,” spat Bob.

“Yes, Stokes. Somehow the tickets are a part of this. But the witches cannot fully steal someone’s life force without actually killing the individual.”

Nessa gave her cat a horrified look. “Jeezus, you don’t think they’re going to kill everybody?”

“No. Of course not,” Pim typed. “Can you imagine the power of such a spell?”

“Ghostbuster size,” Nessa said with conviction.

“Definitely Ghostbuster size. However, a spell could siphon a certain amount of energy if the witches have permission.”

Victoria gripped the arms of the high-back chair, leaning forward, “This I know. I know how they are doing this. The tickets to the fiesta. The party. They are being sold by the witches. By buying a ticket, they ...they...how do I say it?”

“Give permission?” Nessa guessed. “Unknowingly by buying the ticket, or maybe buying a ticket and *using* it to enter, they are unwittingly agreeing to the spell, thereby granting permission.”

Victoria nodded enthusiastically, “Yes, yes, *dice la verdad*. You speak the truth.”

“No wonder they wouldn’t sell us a ticket,” said Bob, jumping out of the chair to pace back and forth. “We’d have felt the spell. Burned the dang thing. Burn the whole damn festival.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. I am not burning anything,” Nessa said in alarm.

Bob frowned at her.

Pim’s paws flew over the keyboard. “The hex will absorb a measure of energy from everyone who bought a ticket. The witches trigger the spell after sunset, focusing the release of energy on Stokes’s grave.”

“And break the vessels,” finished Bob, his back arching in a very feline gesture of anger.

“Precisely,” said the Speak and Spell’s synthetic voice.

“I do not want to see this happen,” said Victoria calmly. “I stayed behind to protect my family from Stokes.”

“Did he, sorry if I’m being rude, um, did he kill you too?” Nessa asked.

“In a way. My parents took me to him when I became ill. He pretended to be a doctor; you know this?”

“Bob told us,” Nessa answered.

“He did not give me medicine. I think perhaps he gave me poison. I died in his office. The monster did not have the power to take my soul at the time. Not yet. It was just for the pleasure of watching me die. Helpless. I stayed behind to protect my family and my town.” She spread her hands. “Yet I am only one ghost. One. My power is small.”

Bob jumped back on the chair to lap his drink. His one good ear twitched and he scratched at it with a hind leg. “I need to talk to the Doc,” he said finally.

“Doc?” asked Nessa.

“Old Doc Ricketts,” answered Bob, his stubby tail twisting in circles.

Pim tapped the keyboard, “But Doc Ricketts is dead,” said the synth voice.

“Precisely,” said Bob. “Exactly why we need him.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Old Doc Ricketts’ was indeed about as dead as you could get. Run over by a Southern Pacific train when his Pontiac stalled on the tracks in Cannery Row May 11, 1948. Ed Ricketts, the Marine Biologist and author John Steinbeck’s best friend, however, was neither gone nor forgotten.

When the Southern Pacific finally pulled up tracks and stopped running to Monterey, the city immortalized his death by leaving both the tracks and train signal at the scene of the accident intact along with a bronze bust of the man.

Hands on her hips, Nessa stared at the memorial. Personally, she thought it was a pretty macabre way to remember the man.

City of Monterey: Dear Edward Ricketts. Here is how and where you died! You’re welcome.

A short time before, on Bob’s orders, they had grabbed Harper’s bike from the garage.

“It’ll be faster than waiting for a ride share,” he’d declared. “Tomorrow’s Halloween, we’re running out of time!”

Which was why as darkness fell, Nessa found herself pedaling with burning thighs along the Rec Trail, Pim in the front basket, Bob in the cat carrier, and Victoria gliding alongside.

Nessa rode a scooter back in LA, not a bike, and her body said, ‘There’s a reason for that girl!’ She was going to have to start doing some miles on the Strand, the pedestrian walk by Hermosa Beach, because, damn!

Panting, she pedaled past Fisherman’s Wharf and the quiet cove she’d watched as the cats ate their chowder.

Victoria left them soon after saying, “There are some others who need to know of this. I will tell them.”

And she was gone.

Nessa kept pedaling, beyond what Bob said was the Coast Guard pier, then another beach fronted by a parking lot and a big green lawn.

“San Carlos Beach,” Bob informed them.

Only a few runners, dog walkers, and cyclists, passed her on the way. Friday night most tourists were probably crowded into the restaurants and bars Monterey was known for.

Pim knew about the Doc Ricketts, Monterey, and Steinbeck connection. He explained via the Speak and Spell, typing awkwardly in the bike basket while Bob urged them to “Hurry the hell up!”

Pim was an avid reader and a fan of Steinbeck.

Nessa was not. She’d read *East of Eden* for school. It took place around World War One here in the Monterey and Salinas area. To say things did not work out well for the characters was an

understatement. Steinbeck, like Hemingway, was too dark for her. Life never worked out for their characters. Given her past, Nessa needed to read stories where even if they didn't precisely live happily ever after, they lived!

"Ricketts was a true pioneer in ecology and Marine Biology here on the Coast," Pim told her, typing rapidly. "Devoted to poetry and philosophy, too. He influenced Steinbeck."

"Too bad he didn't influence the author to write happier stories," Nessa scoffed.

After passing a large mural of life on the docks around Cannery Row, Bob told her to cross the street and park the bike. Thank gawd. Her legs were practically shaking from the effort of pedaling the bike burdened by two large cats.

"There he is," said Bob.

Nessa couldn't see anyone at first but did as Bob said. Parking the bike to the far side of the sidewalk beneath a stand of leafy trees. Pim jumped out, staying in the shadows. She left the Speak and Spell in the bike basket. It was a tough little machine, nevertheless it was a vital part of their life. Why take chances.

Bob scrambled out of the cat carrier, standing by a bench next to a bronze bust of a man. A railroad crossing signal stood to one side. Nessa joined him, reading the plaque on the bust in the fading light.

As she read, a spectral figure shimmered into shape.

The ghost of Doc Ricketts sat on the bench next his memorial. He was dressed in slacks and a loose, short-sleeved cotton shirt tucked in, legs crossed, head back looking at the sky, smoking a spectral cigarette.

"How can he be smoking?" Nessa asked Pim.

Pim gave her a wide-eyed look, shaking his head.

"Train hit me with a cigarette in my hand and a pack in my pocket," said the ghost. "Didn't die until three days later. Still, the dang things came with me. Too bad I didn't think to grab the flask of whiskey in the glove compartment."

Nessa walked back to the bike, whispering to Pim, "Did you hear him speak?"

"Meow," he said, quickly nodding.

Another ghost they could hear. Nessa sincerely hoped this was not the start of a new trend. Life was hard enough with the living around. She didn't need to be surrounded by ghosts who wouldn't shut up. Unlike Aunt Emerald, who was a professional Medium and ghost magnet, Nessa could not spend most of her time inside the house, protected by threshold spells.

Pim pawed at her leg. A signal he wanted to join the conversation. Taking the Speak and Spell out of the basket, Nessa set it on the sidewalk.

Bob jumped up on the bench beside the spirit.

“Bad Juju in town,” said Bob starting the conversation.

Doc Ricketts blew out a puff of spectral smoke. “Who are your friends?” He gave a lazy wave toward Nessa, and, to her surprise, Pim.

“The gal there is Miss Nessa. She’s visiting from down south. She’s a witch.”

Doc Ricketts expression sharpened, “Witch?”

“Good one,” added Bob.

“Define good, cat. You live with a Garde.”

Bob gave a wheezy laugh. “Point taken. No. She ain’t a Garde. No relation. She’s an Elemental. Air, right, Miss Nessa?”

“Yes, Air,” Nessa said cautiously.

“Her Familiar is Mr. Pim. He’s invisible.”

Pim’s paws flew over the keys. “How do you do?” the synth voice said.

Doc Ricketts’ spectral jaw dropped. “Don’t tell me another dang talking cat.”

Bob bristled, the fur standing up along his spine, “Don’t think I like your tone, Doc.”

The ghost turned a palm up to Bob, “Take it easy old timer. Didn’t mean anything by it.”

Bob narrowed his eyes and twitched his whiskers but said, “He ain’t talking, the machine is.”

“Correct,” said the Speak and Spell for Pim.

“What the hell?” Doc Ricketts breathed, “It can type?”

Nessa bristled in defense of Pim. “Please don’t refer to my Familiar as an ‘it.’ Pim understands everything you say. Unlike Bob, here, he can’t speak except through this.”

“But...he can type,” Doc Ricketts said, still staring.

“Yes, I can,” the synth voice replied. “And you’ve been dead for decades yet here we are. Why don’t we move beyond these fascinating revelations to the problem at hand. Stokes.”

A sideways smile crease Doc Ricketts handsome face, “Sassy cat.”

Pim made a sound suspiciously close to a hiss.

Doc Ricketts held up both hands, cigarette still in one, “Alright, alright, Stokes. What’s up with the corpse.”

“We think this is all about raising Stokes from the dead. The Coven Witches, we suspect, created a Mal Paso to siphon energy toward his secret grave. Plus, the witches, the dark ones, not the good witches, are selling tickets to a Halloween party there by Colton Hall. The tickets got spells on ‘em.” Bob jumped down from the bench to pace back and forth. “We can’t let them bring Stokes back.”

“Why?” said the ghost.

Bob came to an abrupt stop. “What do you mean why? Because he’s a bad man. Hell, he ain’t even a man. He’s a demon in a man’s shape. Demons need to be stopped.”

“Do they?” said the ghost slowly drawing on his cigarette. “There is a balance. Life, death. Good and bad. Everything equals out in the end. One on the ascendance the other...”

“Oh shut up!” shouted Bob, whacking a paw through the ghost’s shin. “Keep your damn philosophy for your pal Steinbeck if you ever get up to heaven and see him. Good, bad, balance,” Bob hissed and spit so vehemently Nessa and the ghost both drew back. “You help us figure this out or I swear I will come by and throw those flowers your admirer brings every damn day into the street and piss on them for good measure.”

Nessa flicked her eyes to the bronze bust. There was indeed a handful of colorful flowers in the statue’s hand.

“You wouldn’t dare!” said Doc Ricketts, looking scandalized.

“Wouldn’t I just,” growled Bob. “This man Stokes murdered me and a lot of others, too. I want justice and I’m going to have it. He needs to die and stay dead this time.”

“What about you?” Nessa asked the ghost. “Have you been over to look at it? The Mal Paso. Can you do anything?”

“No on both counts,” the ghost said with a slow shake of his head. “The plaza is too far from my boundary. I can go as far as the Coast Guard Pier and the end of Cannery Row. Where they built the big aquarium. Fascinating place, by the way. Fascinating. I spend much time there admiring the exhibits. No farther than that.”

“You’re tied here?” she asked.

“Yep. Go figure. I didn’t even die right on the tracks. I was in the hospital when I gave up the ghost,” he chuckled, “Ghost,” and shook his head. “But this is where I am and this is where I’ve stayed since the train accident.”

“Ghostly powers?” Nessa pressed.

Doc Ricketts waved the cigarette in the air. “You’re looking at them.”

Nessa thought she had an idea of why Doc Rickett’s was tied to this particular place. Back in the day, it had been a crossroads. Crossroads were notoriously haunted and haunting. Crossroads demons were known to be tricky creatures, appearing and disappearing at will. Back then, it probably grabbed Doc Rickett’s spirit and held on out of mischievous spite.

Bob stood stiff, his legs straight and his knot of a tail spinning. “But you’re smart. You got your brain power. I know you studied a lot about this here afterlife nonsense since your passing. Now put your brain to good use.”



The specter shifted his gaze from Bob to Nessa, pointing his cigarette at her, “How would you stop a curse or a spell, Miss Witch? Fast and simple.”

Nessa thought. Most of her spells were defensive. Magic circles and hexes to hide her and Pim from Frank, the Fallen Angel, and his questing minions. She wore talismans Aunt Emerald and Grandma’ Hattie had made to hide her magical signature. She had her bone brush to draw protective sigils. The brush needed blood, Nessa’s blood, to activate the magic. And... “Salt!” she declared. She always carried a bag of salt. “Buckets of salt or salt water. Salt is protection against magic. Salt water negates magic spells.”

Doc Ricketts nodded, “Salt. Makes sense. But it would need an awful lot of salt or saltwater to wash away the magic on their Mal Paso.”

“We are by the sea,” tapped out Pim.

An idea popped into Nessa’s mind. Why hadn’t she thought of this before? “A waterspout from the ocean would drench the Mal Paso with salt water,” she explained. “Maybe enough to neuter the magic. Though they’ve probably written a lot of sigils we can’t even see. Hard to be sure. Still, I think with enough wind and water we might be able to wash enough away they’d have to conjure a lot of the magic again. And tomorrow is Halloween.”

Doc Ricketts shrugged expressively, “Only thing is, waterspouts are pretty much unheard of here on the Central Coast.”

“I can call one up,” Nessa said.

The ghost gave her a curious look. “Water is water and air is air, isn’t it?”

“Yes, air is my Element. Water will follow the air; a little or a whole lot depending on the strength of the air’s power. It’s how condensation works, you know,” she added with a little sarcastic twang. He was a scientist, after all.

Pim coughed to get her attention, typing, “Waterspouts would do a lot of damage. It could sweep away people, cars. It’s a wet tornado.”

Bob chuckled, “Wet tornado. I like that. Never seen a wet tornado. But...could you do it?”

“I could,” she said confidently. “I can. Keep it small and focused.” She thought about the large open square where the path began. “Sweeping the plaza clean is possible. But there’s no way I could take it all the way up the street to Colton Hall.”

“Shouldn’t be necessary,” said Doc Ricketts. “From my studies, I believe the sort of magic they are channeling is a lot like an electrical circuit. Blow the fuse, in this case the start of the spell in the plaza, and the rest blinks out.”

It was only around a hundred yards from the shore to the plaza. “A short, controlled burst. Should work. The wind likes me.”

Doc Ricketts thick brows shot up his forehead, "Does it indeed? I never thought of the wind having likes or dislikes."

"It does," said Nessa forcefully. "Most definitely. Air has moods. It likes movement. Constant movement. I mean, that's basically the definition of air. When I ask it to blow, the air answers joyfully. I don't know about the other Elements, but I guess water and fire are pretty similar. Movement and chaos."

"Movement and chaos. Fascinating," breathed Doc Ricketts.

"I am sure it is," said Bob sourly, "except the dang road isn't our only problem. Even if you wash it away, which don't get me wrong, we should, the road's only a funnel and it's done most of its damn job already. Who knows how many days ago the Coven set it in motion. The tickets are the real problem. Those Coven Witches will steal energy from everyone who bought a ticket or gets one tomorrow."

Nessa held up a hand to pause the conversation, "If the magic has been working for several days, wouldn't your witch, Harper, have felt it before she left?"

Bob snorted. "Harper probably wouldn't have cared. Or maybe she did and decided to run off to Ireland and let Monterey sort itself out."

"And leave you here alone?" Nessa asked, thinking of her bond with Pim.

Bob's one good ear flattened to his head and his whiskers bristled. "I can look out for myself, little Miss."

"Except when it involves can openers," Nessa said *sotto voce* to Pim.

Bob shot her a dirty look. "I heard you, young miss. I will thank you not to bring my disabilities into this."

"Sorry," Nessa apologized, her cheeks hot.

A nondescript sedan with handicapped card on the rearview mirror pulled up to the curb a few yards back from the intersection. Deadbeat Dad had trained Nessa to observe any car that got close. This was a later model Lexus. Nessa wasn't sure of the year. A custom gun-metal gray paint job. Clean and shiny.

There was still enough light for Nessa to make out the custom vanity plate. One of the retro orange and black plates. They cost extra. *4Grrrrls* with a little black heart between the four and the "G" was written across.

Both Bob and Doc Ricketts stopped speaking. They looked at the car, waiting.

'For what?' Nessa wondered. 'Or who?'

A woman slowly emerged from the driver's seat, making directly for their little group. She was thin, walking with a cane but confidently, like she could just as easily beat you over the head with it as lean on the thing. Her silver-gray hair was expertly cut in a shoulder length bob, bangs across her

forehead. Dressed in fashionable black wide-leg pants, and an A-line top in black, topped with a hip length white cardigan, sleeves pushed up.

The woman had the face of an eagle. Sharp, almost predatory.

She looked directly at Nessa.

Hot, wild energy washed over Nessa like a storm-tossed wave, taking her breath away. Nessa's knees gave way, dropping her to the sidewalk with bruising force. The air around her evaporated as if sucked out into a vacuum. She choked, gagging and gasping, one hand clawing at her chest.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Magic recognizes magic. Nessa's was recognizing this woman's magic like crazy. Pulses of energy ran from her head to her toes and back again.

She heard a man's voice say something but the roaring in her ears drowned out the sound until...with an audible snap... it stopped.

Falling onto her hands, only shakily supporting herself, she breathed raggedly in and out. Pim was in no better condition. His furry chest was heaving, little pink tongue out, all four paws splayed.

The attack had hit him just as hard.

Nessa pulled the air to her, whispering its name. It flew into her fist and she threw it at the woman like a grenade. Magic burst with a sonic boom sending the elderly woman flying back to smack against her car, sweeping her cane away. It clattered down the street in the wake of the wind.

Nessa put one hand on her summoning belt, fingering the sigil for lightning. These sigils had been embroidered by her grandmother with thread soaked in Nessa's own blood. The belt buzzed under her fingertips, the magic anxious to be released. Spells *wanted* to be used.

The night was full of volatile energy flying back and forth overhead due to the Mal Paso messing with the balance. She called the lightning; it flew down eerily walking as if it had legs, circling the ground around the elderly woman.

"Don't mess with my cat," Nessa snarled. Her voice was almost unrecognizable as the young woman of moments before. This voice was very close to the dark, cursed self she kept chained deep within her. Or maybe not so deep tonight.

The lightning circled, smashing into the ground barely missing the woman. Nessa kept it under tight control, showing this unknown adversary what she could do if she wanted. It pitted holes in the concrete and tarmac, tossing sharp shards into the air.

To the elderly woman's credit, she barely flinched as the energy exploded around her.

"Now Miss Margaret," said Bob, scratching his ear with one hind leg and looking distinctly unalarmed by all the magical shenanigans, "this ain't no way to greet a newcomer."

The woman spread her hands wide. Nessa felt the woman's magical aura being drawn back until it was nothing more than a mild buzz sort of like the fizz in a soda.

"Evening, Miss Margaret," Doc Ricketts said evenly.

"Doc, Bob," said the woman.

Nessa brought her hands together with a slap and the lightning arced back into the sky. Pim had recovered and stood pressed against her shins, ready to transform. Nessa faced the woman, her body

vibrating from power ready for release, the remnants of the whirlwind swirling around, blowing her hair in her face.

The woman made a “tsk, tsk,” sound. “Now look at what you’ve done to the sidewalk,” she said. “There are holes in it. Be a dear, Bob, and get my cane for me, will you?”

Bob scampered into the street as the elderly woman brushed her hair back into place and straightened her clothes.

A few people came running up from the street below and several bicyclists pulled to a stop.

Nessa dropped the whirlwind as a collective, “What was that?” rose stridently from all of them.

“Transformer blew or some sort of electrical backfire,” said the elderly woman pointing to the powerlines. “No fire or sparks now. Not even a puff of smoke. Seems fine. I’ll call the power company and report it.” She waved her cell phone. “Thank you for your concern.”

Everyone seemed satisfied with this. Nodding and murmuring agreement. Saying she looked like a very competent sort of woman who would do exactly the right thing.

Nessa felt the beguiling whisper of magic in the woman’s voice, reassuring everyone.

After the last concerned citizen had moved on with their business, Bob emerged from behind the car, the woman’s cane in his mouth.

“Thank you, Bob,” she said leaning easily down to take it. “Well,” said the woman, flicking a finger in Nessa’s direction though she was still looking at Bob and Doc Ricketts, “Introduce me.”

Bob cleared his throat. “Beg pardon. This young gal is Miss Nessa, visitin’ from down South. And next to her is Mr. Pim, her familiar. Invisible. Looks like a cat but ain’t exactly.”

“How do you do,” said the woman softy, slowly shifting the position of her head to meet Nessa’s gaze.

There was no glow of magic around the elderly woman now, but Nessa kept her defenses ready. Her fingers hovered over the sigils on her summoning belt, the true name of the whirlwind ready on her lips.

Sensing his mistress’s mood, Pim jumped, flipping into a backwards somersault. He came down spitting and hissing, in full werecat mode.

Bob drew back, “Well, I’ll be damned, he did it again.”

Doc Ricketts had his cigarette between his lips and clapped heartily as though for a magic trick.

Cane in hand, the elderly lady approached.

Pim growled, crouching low, teeth bared.

“You attacked me,” said Nessa.

“Victoria came to get me. Said there was a new witch in town. A stranger,” said the woman evenly. Despite her age her voice was strong and steady.

“And witches in Monterey attack all strangers?” Remembering the angry, suspicious faces of the women they’d seen on the terrace Nessa wondered if this might be true. She didn’t think she liked Monterey.

The woman cocked her head giving her an even more birdlike appearance. “The town’s been drawing in a less than desirable supernatural element recently. Not everyone is what they appear. Take your not-so-invisible cat, for instance.”

Pim growled.

“And what?” Nessa said, biting off her words. “That gives you the right to smack me with an air bomb and suck out my oxygen? What’s wrong with you?”

“Margaret, are you alienating other witches again?” a new voice spoke up.

Nessa jumped and Pim spun, crouching, ready to attack.

Another woman approached. She was halfway across the crosswalk. Her hair, in tight natural curls, was mostly gray with some streaks of white. Her skin was inky black, her eyes large. She wore a maroon Adidas track suit, the logo prominent on the chest and with the three iconic stripes. Despite her age, she stood straight and tall. She was also glowing.

More magic.

“There’s a fight coming,” said the elderly woman who had attacked Nessa. “I wanted to know what she was made of.”

“She’s made of righteous anger right now, is what she’s made of,” said the woman sounding exasperated. “And who can blame her. I bet you didn’t even give her a how do you do. Good lord, Margaret. I’m the Fire Element, it’s me who’s supposed to be the volatile one.”

Pim growled menacingly, hackles rising as the newcomer got closer.

“Is it Mister or Miss Feline?” the woman asked, looking at Nessa.

Nessa paused before she answered, assessing the woman. Despite the soft, flame-like glow around her, Nessa sensed no buildup of magical energy. In fact, there was a sort of warmth emanating from her both physical and spiritual.

“Mister,” she answered. “His name is Pim.” She knew the only reason Pim hadn’t launched an attack was the two women’s advanced age. He was waiting for her command, which she appreciated. Werecat Pim was not always in full control of himself.

“Mister. I see.” She faced Pim, giving him a friendly look, showing deep dimples on both cheeks. “Mister Pim, my name is Drury Washington. I am best friends with that flighty woman Margaret and let me apologize for her behavior. Anyone can see you two are valiant witches on the side of God and righteous magic.”

Werecat Pim relaxed a little from his intimidating posture. He cocked his head, giving the woman a long side glance, ears twitching forward and back.

"I don't know about God," Nessa said, clearing her throat.

"Told her Margaret's name, Miss Drury," said Bob brusquely. "Not a barbarian, you know. Then Miss Margaret up and knocked the little gal to the ground." He frowned at the other elderly woman. "Not very neighborly."

"Please, forgive her," said the newcomer. "There are some bad witches around town. It's hard to know friend from foe these days."

"These days?" snorted the woman, Margaret. "Nothing has changed. Still just as difficult."

"What hasn't changed?" said yet another voice.

"Traitorous witches trying to ruin out town," answered Drury Washington over her shoulder. "Margaret's out here making friends with her usual tact."

"Margaret," said the voice warningly.

"What?" answered the woman. "She's an Air Elemental, like me. Young. I wanted to know if she'd be a help or a hinderance tomorrow because there's going to be a fight."

Nessa backed up a few steps. Watching as a third woman joined their group. Not more than five feet tall. Even smaller than Nessa, but strongly built. Very different from the birdlike Margaret. Her straight steel gray hair was pulled straight back from her face in a thick braid draped over one shoulder. Asian features. She was wearing soft indigo-colored trousers and a matching Chinese embroidered jacket with traditional frog closures.

"Evening Miss Mei." Doc Ricketts touched his fingers to his forehead as if he was tipping his hat. "Victoria fetch you as well?"

"Good evening, Doctor," said the woman. "Victoria brought us all. She couldn't join this little conclave as she has used up her spiritual energy for the day and needs to rest."

Nessa shifted her position so she could see all three women. "What," she said to the group at large, "is going on."

Bob cleared his throat noisily like he was going to hack up a hairball. "Miss Nessa, these are the Four Horsewomen of the Apocalypse."

"Three," said Nessa. "There are only three women here."

"Alberta is at Stokes's gravesite," said Drury. "She's number four. We don't think it's wise to leave it unguarded at night right now."

"Four," said Bob again, eyeballing Nessa.

Nessa held up her fingers counting off, “War, Death, Pestilence, and Famine. Apocalypse? I’m all for gender equality and don’t care if its horsemen or women but they are not a good thing. Who is who?”

The women started to laugh, joined by Bob and Doc Ricketts.

Nessa was not laughing. There was nothing funny about the death magic the mythical four represented. Pim had tensed up again, warning growls rumbling in his chest.

Nessa began to pull the air around her, whispering words of power.

Drury put her hands up, “No, stop, please stop. It’s not like that, young lady. The Four Horsewomen was our name for ourselves back in the day.”

“Way back,” said Mei flatly.

“Only way to get around was on horseback or by wagon,” continued Drury. “Or on foot.”

“Wait,” said Nessa, taking it all in. “Wait, wait. What do you mean the only way to get around?”

Bob jumped onto the bench by Doc Ricketts. Sitting back on his haunches he gestured at the three women. “These are the Elemental Witches, along with Miss Alberta, who trapped old demon Stokes all those years ago. Put him in the ground and have kept him there for over a hundred years.”

“*Taadaa*,” sang Margaret, flourishing her cane.

Bob said they killed or at least disabled Stokes in the 1860s. Which meant these women had to be probably a hundred fifty years old. Even more maybe. Elemental witches are long lived. Nessa knew this for a fact. Her great grandmother had been hale and hearty according to Grandma’ Hattie until well into her middle hundreds. But still. She couldn’t help but be impressed.

“We called ourselves the Four Horsewomen but not of the apocalypse,” Drury said. “Quite the opposite. We protected Monterey and the towns nearby as they grew over time. Carmel, Seaside, Marina, even Pacific Grove.”

“Dang Methodists,” snorted Margaret.

Nessa’s face must have betrayed her cluelessness.

“The place started out as a Methodist Camp back in the day. Lots of rules. Can’t do this, can’t do that. No drinking. No fast buggy riding.” She shook her head. “Those people.”

“Yet their religious spirit didn’t extend to protecting the Chinese Fishing Village nearby,” Mei said fiercely.

“No, it did not,” said Drury.

“The Central Coast has an ancient Portal into Faerie,” Mei said. “The Portal draws magical beings here. Local witches like us try to keep a balance.”



“Well, you’re not doing a very good job,” Nessa said making a face. “The Mal Paso isn’t exactly a secret. Nearly knocked me on my butt when I set foot on it.”

Drury went to stand side by side with Margaret, Mei moving to do the same.

“Those Coven Witches summoned it a few days ago.”

The way Drury spit out the word *those Coven Witches* made it clear there was no love lost between the Four Horsewomen and the witches from the terrace on Alvarado.

Margaret gave her head a quick shake. “Can’t lie. We sort of dropped the ball there. The Coven Witches had it up and running in one night.”

“They’ve been quietly working on this plan for some time,” added Mei. “When the construction work broke one of the guardian vessels at Stokes’s gravesite, we focused on him, not them. Even though he was still trapped, it released some nasty energy.”

Drury shook her head, “All pent up there, rotting underground. We figured it was all Stokes.”

“We figured wrong. He used that opening to communicate with the Coven Witches,” said Mei. “They are going to help break him out of containment.”

“Something the city aided them in doing,” Margaret said, sounding disgusted.

“Yes. The construction work must have kickstarted this whole Halloween scheme,” agreed Mei.

“What’s in it for them?” Nessa asked. “Setting this Stokes psycho free, I mean. What’s the benefit to the witches? What could he have promised?”

“You’re a witch,” said Doc Ricketts, the cigarette dangling from his mouth. “What would you want?”

Pim hissed at the ghost.

“That’s my business,” she said shortly, practically hissing herself. “I don’t know you.” Making a sweeping gesture she said, “I don’t know any of you.”

“Of course, of course,” said Drury soothingly. “This particular group of Coven Witches has a long history here. Quite as long as ours yet with a significantly different agenda. Dark magic feeds a certain kind of appetite. And they are always hungry.”

“Damned if I can figure it out.” Bob said with a shake of his head. “Stokes’s power is concentrated inside himself. Sure, he can call demons, but what they gonna’ do with a pack of demons on the Central Coast if they release him? Nobody wants demons running loose. Even those Coven Witches.”

“Nobody sane,” drawled Doc Ricketts puffing out a smoke ring. “We talkin’ about someone sane? Because I never met this fellow Stokes alive or dead.”

“No,” said Bob, “not someone sane. Crazy murderin’ mother...” he glanced at Nessa. “Um...idiot.”

Margaret squeezed between Bob and Doc Ricketts on the bench, sitting down with a sigh of what sounded like relief. Nessa had thrown her against the car pretty hard. ‘The Coven doesn’t like the fact the girls and I still limit their magical shenanigans in the area. They want to be the big dogs.’

Doc Ricketts rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Something to do with you ladies then?”

“Possibly,” conceded Margaret.

“You all think the same thing?” he asked looking to the two other women.

“Yes,” answered Drury. “Witches have long ancestral memories. They’ve never forgiven us for overthrowing their coven back in the 1860s. They were aiding Stokes and we put them in the ground.”

Put them in the ground?

“You killed them?” asked Nessa, speaking up.

“Put them in the ground,” repeated Mei.

“They deserved it,” said Drury, “Yes, they did.”

“Stokes ain’t all you sealed in the garden,” said Bob, sitting back on his haunches and looking from one witch to the other. “You going to tell them, or shall I?”

Margaret inclined her head. “We anchored the corners of the grave with the Elemental vessels and ashes.”

“What kind of ashes?” asked Nessa. A shiver running down her back.

“Witch’s’ ashes,” said Mei.

“We fought the other coven,” Margaret took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “To the death. No quarter given on either side. They wanted control of this city and the valley. We couldn’t let them take it.”

Nodding, Mei continued, “We won, obviously. Burned their bodies and put the ashes in the ground around the vessels as secondary anchors. We buried them deep. Surrounded the grave with Yew, wormwood, and mugwort. The earth took it all in, with Alberta’s help.” She waved a hand in the direction of their absent member. “Enhancing the spell. Poisoned earth is not just a literary term. In our world, it’s a reality. Poisoned earth can work to contain evil as well as spread it. Our spell was the former not the latter.”

“We regularly re-spell the earth with an application of yew ash mixed with the other herbs,” Mei said. “We’ve made sure for more than a century and a half nobody messed with the garden.”

“Until now,” said Bob sourly.

“Do witches often attack each other?” Nessa couldn’t help asking. She had no experience with Coven Witches. Elementals were shunned by most covens who didn’t like the Fae connection all Elementals shared in their DNA. Grandma’ Hattie had been on her own. Nessa’s dad was not an Elemental. Nessa’s magic was from her maternal side. However, dad avoided socializing with other

witches. Though his choices might have been because he was a con artist criminal. Witches were not the easy marks humans made.

“Can’t speak for other cities,” said Margaret with a frown, “but we’ve been fighting to keep Monterey safe almost two centuries.”

“And we might be losing the battle if we can’t figure out a defense, fast” Drury said.

## CHAPTER NINE

Nessa and Pim took the bike and returned to the Plaza near Fisherman's Wharf. It was fully dark now and the temperature had dropped by several degrees. Nessa shivered in her old cotton hoodie. Bob stayed to talk more with the Elemental Witches and Doc Ricketts, declaring he could get himself home.

They parked the bike as near to the border of the spell as Nessa thought was safe. A low wall ringed the outer perimeter. Nessa and Pim sat together, the Speak and Spell between them.

The Plaza was quiet, dark in the center though the lights from the nearby hotel lit up the edges. Sitting and staring, Nessa realized the darkness wasn't completely natural. Energy circled the center of the plaza, the faint crackling resonance of magic barely audible. Humans wouldn't be able to hear or feel it.

Nessa did her best to quiet her mind, shove out the jumble of thoughts and sensations from her encounter with the Elemental witches. She didn't know how she felt about them yet. They said they were protecting Monterey. Bob said they were the good witches. Bob seemed like a pretty strict, no-nonsense judge of character.

Elementals were a unique sort of witch. More Fae than human. Nessa didn't know Elementals *could* form a coven. Was coven even the correct word for what the Four Horsewomen were? In Fae, each Element was divided into its own kingdom, as Nessa well knew. She'd been forced to pledge her allegiance to the Queen of Air once Nessa's power was discovered by a spy from Fae.

And even in Fae, the Elemental Kingdoms didn't necessarily work together. They allied themselves with Faerie Seasonal courts: Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. Beyond that, the Elemental rulers seemed to form alliances based on need rather than any friendship of earth, air, fire, or water.

Margaret was Air, she'd made that obvious. Drury was fire, she'd admitted it, plus she had a golden glow. Mei had to be water because they said the fourth Elemental... What was her name? Anita? Aretha? She couldn't remember. Anyway, that one had helped them put the witches in the ground. Emphasis on ground, so...earth.

Pim put a Paw on her thigh, pressing slightly with his claw. He indicated the Plaza with a tilt of his chin before lifting his paw and pointing to it.

"Yeah," she said, blowing out a noisy breath. "There's something more in the center. I need to try and touch the magic, see if I can feel below the surface of the spell."

She got to her feet, taking several small steps until she could feel the buzz of magic through the souls of her Chucks. Squatting down, she reached out with a fingertip, slow and cautious, until she felt

the snap, crackle, of the magic. Opening her palm, she took a deep breath. She attempted to rest her hand against the invisible barrier.

The barrier snapped back at her touch, not liking her presence one little bit.

Biting her lip, Nessa forced herself to keep contact, trying to read the magic. A soft touch inside her let her know Pim was twining his magic around hers.

The magic burned and bit at her skin, but she held on as she tried to separate the sensations creating images and symbols in her head. Finally, the Mal Paso had had enough and slapped her so hard she fell back, bumping her head on the edge of the low wall.

“Ow!” she said, rubbing her head. She was going to have a lump for sure.

Pim checked they were unobserved before setting his paws to the keyboard.

“What did you feel?” he asked.

Nessa settled her back against the low wall. “I think...” she considered the mix of sensations and images, “I think on the surface it’s a Chaos Curse. Something to confuse any supernatural who wanders too near.”

“Your father favored those to cover our tracks,” the synth voice said, speaking for Pim.

He had indeed. Before a job, Dad would often lay Chaos Curses to create enough of a mess so that when he showed up to save the day, he’d be welcomed for sure. After a job, if there were supernaturals involved, the Chaos Curse would hide their trail as Nessa, Pim, and Dad hightailed it out of town.

With a Chaos Curse you can’t always predict what will happen but generally things go bad. The witches who laid this figured they could keep it pretty simple, Nessa guessed. They couldn’t know Nessa had a lot of experience in these sorts of hexes thanks to her dad’s criminal career.

“The Chaos Curse is just a cover for what’s going on underneath,” she said.

“A funnel,” typed Pim.

“Yep. Siphoning human energy to the festival site by the City Hall.”

“The Chaos Curse guarding the underlying hex is bad for us. This is a big spell. I mean,” she threw her hands to encompass the plaza and the street beyond. “Look at the size of it. It’s Dark Magic, too. Magic demands sacrifice and a big, malevolent spell requires a big, nasty sacrifice.”

They were both quiet for a moment figuring out exactly what this could mean.

“Saltwater might not be strong enough to break the entire spell,” the synth voice said at last.

Nessa puffed out her cheeks, “Yep, yep. You’re right. And I don’t even know if it’s more important to break the Mal Paso spell or try and stop whatever is going to happen at the festival.”

“Both, probably,” typed Pim.

Pim yawned and Nessa couldn’t help joining in.

“I’m tired,” she declared. “What do you think, should we stay and try the saltwater spell or go home?”

Pim took a moment to consider. “I think we should try and wash it away tonight,” he typed. “There’s a Taco Bel on Alvarado. Let’s get some food and wait until ten or eleven before you summon the waterspout.”

As much as she wanted to argue against this idea, Nessa had to agree it was the best course of action.

“Why are we even doing this?” she asked Pim.

He hesitated; his paws poised over the keyboard. Then typed. “Besides being stand-up, morally straight magic-using individuals? You promised to look after Bob.”

“Fionna,” Nessa spat in a very good imitation of an angry Pim. “She knew something was going on, didn’t she? And her cousin, too.”

Pim pushed the Speak and Spell away indicating he didn’t have anything else to say. And indeed, what else was there to discuss? They were stuck once again between a rock and a hard place.

As she zipped up the machine in Bob’s cat carrier and shrugged it over her soldiers, Pim jumped nimbly into the bike’s basket.

How could someone from parents like Nessa’s: a mother who sold her soul and a scam artist father with no morals at all, have such a stupidly strong moral compass coupled with a stupid mouth letting her make stupid promises?

Later, fortified by Burrito Supremes and beef tacos with extra sour cream, Nessa and Pim stood as close to the water as they could get. With a finger to the sigil on her summoning belt and Pim by her side, she prepared to call up a small, hopefully small, waterspout. She was at the esplanade between the entrance to the wharf and the little yacht harbor full of sailboats. It would take some tricky maneuvering to avoid causing any damage.

The air had turned slow and sluggish. Very different from when she had fought the witch, Margaret, by Doc Rickett’s crossroads. The more normal atmospheric pressure seemed to have reasserted itself. Humidity was always higher here in the north. Nessa could taste the heavy concentration of salt particles in the air. Salt particles were a good thing. The more salt in her waterspout, the better.

It took a few minutes to get the air excited enough to take an interest in her call.

“Stop being lazy,” she admonished her normally gleefully chaotic Element, “pick up the water and get over here.”

A dozen yards beyond the last line of moored sailboats, a plume of white at last lifted from the sea. A twisting, swirling cone of foam, water, and wind rose slowly from the surface. Nessa beckoned it closer, trying to avoid the boats and keep it away from the wharf.

She had to move quickly. There was no one around but a few homeless drifters wrapped in sleeping bag against the planters in the esplanade.

The waterspout danced across the ocean surface, stretching up to the night sky like some sort of giant albino snake. Calling and coaxing, she pumped energy into the spell until the spinning tip of the watery, air-filled mass touched land. She pulled it as quickly as she dared over the short expanse of concrete before pushing it into the plaza.

To her infinite relief, it passed through the invisible barrier and beyond. She'd been afraid the barrier might be strong enough to rebound her spell right back onto her. As she positioned the funnel cloud in the center of the plaza, she heard Pim give an exclamation of surprise.

"What in tarnation is that?" said a husky voice behind her.

Nessa jumped and nearly lost her hold on the waterspout.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw what looked like the bearded face of one of the homeless guys, grizzled and wrinkled.

"Waterspout," she said breathlessly.

"Well, I'll be damned. When I saw you two with ole Bob, I thought we might be gettin' up to somethin'." He grinned, showing several broken teeth. "Name's Martin. Friend of that rascally cat. Figured I'd keep an eye out in case ya'all came back to the plaza. Bad stuff in the plaza. Go on. I'll watch your back."

Friend of Bob's or not, Nessa didn't really have a choice but to keep going. Losing control of the waterspout was not an option. Lifting her hands, she wrestled the air back under her control. As she pushed it toward the center of the plaza, an eerie howl echoed through the night. She watched as a skeleton of gigantic proportions appeared within the mysterious swirl of darkness.

The apparition surged to its feet standing thirty feet tall. Facing the waterspout, jaws agape and red-light shining from empty eye sockets, the monster threw its bony arms around the waterspout. With a roar louder than the wind, the skeleton threw the waterspout back at Nessa. She tried to hold it back but the momentum from the skeleton's throw was too great.

To her great surprise, Martin stepped beside her, his arms out. Crackles of white energy rippled from his fingertips.

The skeleton turned its burning gaze on Martin and roared again.

The waterspout wavered between them, as they pushed and pulled and pushed and pulled at the funnel cloud, trying to get control. Finally, the pressure of magic, air, and gravity proved too much. The

column exploded. Water showered down drenching Nessa, Pim, and her helper in a deluge of salty sea water flooding the plaza.

The Skeleton howled and began to stride toward them, bony fingers grasping. As Nessa prepared a defensive sigil to toss at the monstrous apparition, Martin stepped in front of her, shouting a string of words powerful enough to make Nessa's knees go weak.

Each word took shape in the air, glowing purple as it sped to the skeleton. The words hit the thing like missile strikes, exploding it in a shower of purple and white light. With a last eerie howl, the apparition disappeared.

Cheers and whoops rose up from somewhere on the opposite side of the plaza followed by clapping and more cheers.

People were shouting, "More, more!" followed by louder whoops.

Good news: at least they thought it was part of a Halloween show.

Bad news: There would be no encore tomorrow night.

Dripping, drenched in cold water, Pim and Nessa stared at Martin.

"Well, that became quite a show," the man drawled, his mouth stretching up just a little at the sides adding even more wrinkles around his eyes. He was as wet as the two of them, puddles pooling at his feet.

"Th...thank you," Nessa stuttered. "For the help."

"Owed old Bob a favor," said the man, nodding companionably. "Happy to oblige. Don't know if we broke the Mal Paso. Want to check?"

"Yes, okay," mumbled Nessa, still surprised over the turn of events. She didn't know many wizards but seeing one in such rough condition, well, she couldn't imagine the backstory on him. He must be an old timer, like Bob.

Leaving wet footprints in her wake, she sloshed close to where the border had been. Nessa cautiously put out her hand.

Nothing. No sparks. No pain.

Sucking in a breath, Nessa stepped forward, fully expecting to be zapped.

Instead, there was only a slight tingling sensation running up from her toes and then fading to nothing.

"I think it's gone or almost."

"You should walk up Alvarado," Martin said, "make sure it's not channeling energy no more."

She looked at the Wizard, "Yes, I'll take the bike and Pim and I will do that. Oh, you probably can't see but this is Pim, my Familiar. He's invisible."

Pim gave a few chirping meows before bobbing up to place his head under the man's hand.



“Well, I’ll be damned,” Martin said with a shake of his head. “And here I thought Bob was something special. An Invisible cat. Pleased to meet you, Pim.” He squatted and held out his palm.

Pim placed a paw in it and the two shook.

“Thank you for your help. The skeleton was the anchor for the spell, my waterspout only washed away part of the energy behind it. If you hadn’t destroyed the skeleton-thing I think the spell would have rewritten itself. Maybe rewritten me, too,” she added ruefully.

Standing, he gave her a peace sign.

She looked at him closely. He was soaking. “I’m sorry you got all wet. Bob is at Harper’s home. Do you want to go there and dry your clothes?”

Raising his hands, the air around him shimmered, becoming foggy and indistinct. For a moment Nessa saw a completely different individual within the fog. Thick, wavy, gray hair, hung to his shoulders. No scraggly beard but an impressive moustache like an old-time cowboy and thick gray eyebrows over dark, hooded eyes. Tall and rangy and certainly not wet and grungy. He wore loose jeans and what looked like a flannel shirt. Did he have...she stared harder...a *badge* on his shirt? And then the fog swirled and the grungy, homeless man stood before her. No longer wet.

“I’m fine,” he said, “but thanks for the invite. Tell Bob I’ll see him around.”

Turning on his heel he waved over his shoulder and after a few steps, disappeared into the night.

Literally disappeared.

Nessa took a long shuddering breath. “And I thought LA was weird,” she said to Pim.

Pim meowed in wholehearted agreement.

Wet and miserable, she loaded Pim into the bike’s front basket then slung on Bob’s cat carrier, Pim’s precious Speak and Spell was still tucked safely inside.

Pedaling slowly, she rode right through the center of the plaza, making sure the spell was gone. All felt quiet and normal. Wet but normal.

On Alvarado, she retraced the route Bob had taken earlier in the day.

Some of the bars and restaurants downtown were still lively and loud. For the most part, the street was quiet. Only a few flicks of energy reached out to tease Nessa as she pedaled along. The Mal Paso seemed offline, at least for tonight.

“Let’s ride over by Colton Hall,” she said to Pim. “See if the Coven is holding human sacrifices on the lawn or something.”

The huge lawn and garden in front of Colton Hall had been fully enclosed now by the shoulder high green netting they’d seen the workers putting up earlier in the day. It was a ticketed event after all.

The fence was strung with orange, green, and purple lights and every other fence post was decorated with a glowing plastic Jack O'Lantern. Some were orange but others were green or blue or purple.

A wide brick walkway bisected the lawn from the sidewalk to the front of Colton Hall. Large Jack O'Lanterns, real pumpkins this time, with leering grins or fierce frowns lined both sides of the walk.

Tents and booths strung with colorful lights were up and ready for tomorrow's festival.

On one side of the lawn a big tent with a hand-painted sign said: "Kid Friendly Haunted House." Other tents or booths advertised face-painting, autumn crafts, fortune-telling, and more that Nessa couldn't make out from where she stood. According to the poster, everything inside the carnival was free, hence the ticket charge. Except food and drink, of course.

On the opposite lawn, a haybale maze wound around half the lawn with dozens of scarecrows and piles of cornstalks in and around it. A stage was set up for the promised live entertainment with an open area directly in front. Probably so kids could jump and play around to the music or magic shows. Rows of simple folding chairs were lined up a few yards behind the open space.

At least a dozen food trucks had parked outside the fenced lawns, ready for the big day.

Despite the hour, people were out and about, even families with kids, strolling around the outside of the event, admiring the lights with *oohs* and *aaahs* and pointing at the decorations. The enormous oak and pine trees around the garden were wound round with lights and decorated with lanterns in Halloween colors and designs.

Private security walked the perimeters making sure no one got up to any pre-Halloween mischief.

"I'm impressed," Nessa said to Pim. "Are you impressed?"

Pim meowed he was.

There was no sign of the Coven Witches. Their ticket booth shuttered and dark.

Nessa walked the bike closer to Colton Hall. It, too, was decorated with lights and Halloween banners draped along both sides of the outdoor staircase flanking the second-floor entrance. Cascading projections of Jack O'Lanterns, black cats, witches, and other Halloween symbols scrolled across the broad roof. Every window, of which there were many, was lighted with alternating purple and orange lights.

Three shadowy figures stood near the steps leading to the second floor. At first Nessa thought they were security guards.

She rode a little closer.

Not guards. Soldiers.

Three men in old time soldiers' uniforms.

Pim's back arched and he hissed, tail straight as a lance.

Nessa's throat went dry.

Their necks.

Their necks were twisted and their heads hung at horrifying angles.

The three men lifted their faces to her. Their eyes glowed.

She spun the bike around and rode away as fast as her tired legs could pedal.

"I wish we'd never come to Monterey," she said to Pim.

And Halloween was just getting started.

## CHAPTER TEN

Halloween morning dawned much too early.

Nessa's phone buzzed insistently on the bed next to her. Dang it, she'd forgotten to silence the stupid thing when she fell into bed last night.

Glaring blearily at the screen she saw the call was from Jun Hee. Jun Hee Kim was a fellow Bounty Hunter at Barracuda Bail Bonds. A pain in her butt mostly as he tried to steal her jobs. Occasionally, in her weaker moments, she was also starting to think of him as a friend.

Maybe.

Possibly.

When he wasn't being a jerk.

He was also her first kiss. Wouldn't you know? Jun Hee of all people.

Nessa had spent her life on the run from her mother's bargain with Frank, the Fallen Angel. There was no time for friends let alone of the boy or man variety. It was only after settling in at Aunt Emerald's, starting college in Santa Monica and, yes, beginning work at Barracuda Bail Bonds, Nessa's life had begun to shift. Ever so slightly, but shift it had.

Fionna was in her life, for better or worse. Aunt Emerald, too. Then there were the La Rue twins, Roman Barracuda's marginally human enforcers who were nothing but kind to Pim and Nessa.

And Ravi Singh. Ravi worked as an agent for the Infernal Court. Nessa called him a Witch Cop. He hated the term. They'd met on Nessa's first case, ironically bringing Fionna Garde in after missing her court date. They were always falling in and out of each other's cases. They were both new at their jobs and despite him being from an extremely rich family and Nessa being extremely *not*, they had bonded over work. He was her first true friend. Sometimes she wondered if he could be something more.

But Jun Hee?

He was a royal pain in the butt.

The kiss hadn't been romantic.

It couldn't have been.

Jun Hee's family suffered under a terrible curse thanks to their great-grandfather's greed and murderous personality. The Kim's were haunted by a witch who killed the male members of his family line.

The men of Jun Hee's family kept themselves hidden from the witch with magical sigils tattooed all over their bodies. It wasn't a perfect system. Jun Hee's father had only managed to live into his forties. Once the witch killed him, Jun Hee had become next in line. If he died, the curse would target his

younger brother. Jun Hee's tattoos had started failing and the young bounty hunter was in danger of becoming the witch's next victim.

Jun Hee had come to Nessa in desperation. He knew she, too, was under a curse.

Nessa figured out a way to trap the phantom witch in Faerie.

It had been a rough and tumble fight and when they succeeded, Jun Hee had kissed her.

Gratitude was all it was, she told herself. Relief at being free of the witch for the foreseeable future. Not because he liked her.

And she certainly didn't like *him*.

"What?" she groaned, answering the call.

"Where are you?" he demanded, shouting loud enough Nessa jerked the phone away from her ear.

"Meeeoowwwwrrr," said Pim irritably, shoving his head under the pillow.

"It's Jun Hee," she told her Familiar.

"Yes, it's me," said Jun Hee, "don't you have caller I.D. like a normal person?"

"I was talking to Pim," she said primly. "Sheesh. What do you care where I am?"

"I mean are you on your way back? Like at the airport flying home?"

"Why?"

"There are three fairies by your aunt's front gate crying for tacos and their queen and drawing too much attention. Your aunt wants them gone. She called me since you're up north."

Her trio of fairies, the legacy of her first trip into the Fae world and were now forever her bondmaidens thanks to Fae law. The girls were always popping in and out of her life. They loved tacos, Panda Express, and Nessa, roughly in that order. As their Queen, Nessa was in charge of feeding them whenever they showed up.

Oh crap. She'd left her Crown, the symbol of her forced fealty to the Queen of Air *and* her key into Faerie, back in Hermosa Beach. Why would she need to pop into Faerie on a long weekend in Monterey, she'd reasoned? The crown acted like an Air Tag for the fairies. Since Nessa always carried it in her backpack, they could home in on the crown and find her anywhere.

On reflection, she realized maybe it was a good thing she hadn't brought the Crown with its homing signal broadcasting loud and clear for the girls.

"I think they're drunk," Jun Hee said.

Nessa hissed in exasperation, "God damn it." Her fairies were made of chaos energy.

"They're probably not thinking very clearly. How can I send them to you?"

An electric charge of alarm jumped through Nessa's body. "No!" she yelled into the phone.

"Why are they there?" she said more to herself than Jun Hee.

"Besides for tacos? It's Halloween. They probably want to celebrate with you."

“Oh hell. I hadn’t even thought of them when I accepted Fionna’s offer.”

“Fionna sent you up there? I bet there’s bad stuff going on.”

Nessa kept silent.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” said Jun Hee. “Idiot. You know if Fionna’s involved it’s only going to benefit Fionna somehow.”

“Truth,” Nessa muttered.

Bob walked through the bedroom door. She always left her door open a crack at night in case Pim needed to go to the bathroom.

“What in tarnation is going on up here?” said Bob popping back on his haunches and spreading his front paws wide. “I could hear you downstairs.”

She pointed to her phone.

“Who you talkin’ to?” barked Jun Hee.

“Bob the cat,” she answered.

“*The what?*” shouted Jun Hee, promoting Nessa to jerk the phone back from her ear again.

“Bob. He’s a talking cat. Not relevant right now.”

“Am too relevant!” said Bob grumpily.

“Sorry,” she said to the cat. “Didn’t mean it the way it sounded.”

“Hmph,” said Bob crossing his paws in front of him.

“How do I send the fairies to you?” Jun Hee asked. “Your aunt wants them gone.”

“Oh dear God, don’t send them here. Please. I’m begging you. Could you take them for tacos? I’ll owe you big time.”

“It’s eight a.m., I don’t think taco places are open yet.”

“They’re open. Maybe not for tacos. Breakfast Burritos would work,” she knew she sounded desperate. If they showed up here, she didn’t know what she’d do. “Anything with salsa.”

“Take who for...” Bob started to ask before spinning in the air in a flip shouting, “God in heaven, what’s wrong with your eyes?”

Crap.

Nessa put her free hand in front of her face. She’d taken the blue contacts out to sleep. Her eyes were in reality black from side to side. Part of the delightful curse her mother had left for her after selling her soul. Only demons and Fallen Angels had eyes as black as Nessa’s.

She grabbed a pair of sunglasses on the side table, slipping them on. “It’s a legacy from my mother,” she said to Bob. “I’ll explain later.”

“You sure as hell better!” exclaimed the cat. “And what’s all this talk about tacos?”

“I have fairies,” she said to him. “Three of them. They like tacos.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Bob made a sound of disgust.

The phone had gone quiet. After a few beats, Nessa asked, “Jun Hee? Are you still there?”

She heard an exasperated sigh through the phone. “I guess I can take them. You *will* owe me big time.”

“I know, I know. There’s some bad supernatural stuff going on here and I don’t need to figure my fairies into the magical equation.”

“I knew it! What have you gotten yourself into now? Do you need help? I can come up.”

Pim pulled his head out from under the pillow to blink in surprise at her. His feline super-hearing meant he could hear their conversation, pillow or not.

She blinked back at the cat. This was not the response Nessa expected from Jun Hee. Come up and help? Really?

“No, no. Um, I, uh, I think I can handle this.”

Bob noisily cleared his throat.

“I’m not alone. Bob is here and there’s a group of Elemental witches.”

“A group of witches?” Jun Hee exclaimed. “How big is this problem?”

“Look, Jun Hee, we can deal. I made a promise and I need to keep it. Could you just put my fairies into a happy food coma for a little while. I’ll pay you back.”

“You don’t have to pay me back. But if you need help...” he trailed off sounding uncharacteristically nice.

“No, we’ll manage. Can I talk to the girls?”

“I’ll put you on speaker.”

Immediately she heard sobbing and the word “taco” repeated over and over.

“Hey girls!” Ness said loudly. “It’s me. Nessa.”

Squeals of happiness echoed through the speaker.

“God in heaven,” said Bob backing up.

“Quiet, quiet, *shhhhh*,” she urged the fairies. She never knew how much they actually understood.

“Listen. I’m kind of busy. Jun Hee is going to take you for tacos...”

“It’s eight in the morning” Jun Hee said again.

“Maybe not tacos but food. Food, food, food.”

“*Food, food, food*,” the three sang.

“Jun Hee is going to take you...”

“*Jooooon heeeee*,” they chanted. “*Jooooon heeee! Loooove yuuuuu!*”

“Gwanse-uem, Goddess of Mercy, help me,” moaned Jun Hee.

“Yes, go with Jun Hee and I will see you soon, okay?”

*“Sooooon, soooooon, ooooohhhkay, ooooohhhkay!”* they sang even louder.

“Happy Halloween, girls,” she said with false cheerfulness.

*“Halloweeeen!”* They sang. *“Halloweeeen! Halloweeeen!”*

“You owe me big time,” Jun Hee said, snapping off speaker mode. “Stay safe. This Bob the cat better watch out for you.”

And he rang off.

“He the boyfriend?” Bob asked, smoothing a patch of fur over a scarred bare spot on his stomach.

“What? No. No. We work together at Barracuda Bail Bonds.”

“Sounded boy-friendly to me,” he said, licking another spot.

“No. No boyfriend.”

“Hunh,” said Bob, over his shoulder, walking out the door. “Make yourself useful. Times wastin’. Come downstairs and open a can of tuna for me.”

Nessa pushed back the covers. Pim gave a mighty yawn stretching out all four paws. His whiskers were aimed in every direction and his fur was in desperate need of a good brushing. She must look worse. She was drained from using so much magical energy last night to summon and manipulate the waterspout. Her joints ached and her head was pounding.

She needed ibuprofen and coffee. Preferably a quadruple espresso.

Nessa quickly put in her blue contacts before the two of them limped downstairs to the kitchen. Her thighs were killing her from all the bike riding.

Pim was limping in sympathy. Cats do that.

Outside the sky was cloudy with a coastal haze. A group of seagulls flew by screeching noisily. Pelicans and a variety of waterfowl were diving into the sea just offshore. There were a lot of birds riding the gentle swells. Something must be schooling. What was Monterey famous for back in the day?

Sardines.

Right.

Then they overfished them all and the canning died out in the forties. Which was why the Cannery District had been transformed into a tourist area. Hotels, restaurants, tourist shops, etc., etc.

Maybe the sardines had made a comeback.

Whatever was in the water, the birds were very excited about it.

Bob was sitting on the kitchen counter waiting for them, his knotted tail twisting in circles. “The tins are in the cabinet by the sink. And put some coffee on for God’s sake.”

They’d come home last night to find Bob lying on the one of the deck chairs by the front door, front paws tucked under him.



She was sure he wasn't locked out. Harper's digital door lock had large pushbuttons. Bob would be able to press them, popping the door open.

The Jack O'Lantern was face down on the ground by the stairs leading to the front door.

*"El camino esta cerrado,"* the pumpkin mumbled as Nessa and Pim climbed the stairs.

"Shut up, pumpkin!" snarled Bob.

However, the pumpkin was correct, Nessa informed Bob as she stepped inside. The Mal Paso spell was broken thanks to some timely help from Bob's friend, Martin.

"Lent a hand, did he? Good man Martin. Helps me keep an eye on this place whenever he's passing through. Now open a can of cat food for me and leave me alone. I'm about starved."

She'd done as Bob asked before dragging herself upstairs last night. Nessa had peeled off her wet clothes, took a quick shower, wrapped Pim in a big, dry towel, and fell into bed.

And now it was Halloween. D-Day for whatever the Coven had planned for the city of Monterey.

Nessa made espresso for all of them. Black for her and Pim. Some cream for Bob. Leaning with her back against the counter, Nessa noticed a flutter of white by the front door.

Cup in hand she walked over, not surprised to see Victoria floating there.

She opened the door.

"Hi Victoria," she said. "You missed a lot of excitement last night."

The temperature in the entryway dropped ten degrees.

"Oh, did I? I apologize. I did not have the energy to stay out. Visiting here and gathering the Four Horsewomen," she shrugged making a helpless gesture. "Your pumpkin is on the ground."

"Bob knocked it off," Nessa said as she grabbed a wool throw from the couch to wrap around her shoulders. "Too mouthy."

"Mouthy?" asked Victoria looking confused.

"She means it mouthed off. Talked too much," said Bob from the kitchen, licking coffee from his whiskers. "Come over here and I'll catch you up."

Nessa followed the ghost into the kitchen, pulling the throw tightly around her against the girl's ghostly chill. She wanted to hear what Bob had to say, too, since she wasn't clear what was going to happen today.

Bob explained first how the Mal Paso was closed though it wouldn't make much difference now. The mischief was more or less done. Hundreds, maybe even a thousand people had followed the magical road to Colton Hall and the ticket booth.

The Coven intended to raise Stokes, as they'd already guessed. Energy siphoned from the spelled Halloween Festival tickets, once they were used, would provide the conduit.

“We’re still not sure what’s in it for the Coven,” said Bob. “Stokes won’t be any help to them. He ain’t what they call a ‘team player.’ The witches can’t want a bunch of demons raising havoc around town with Stokes playin’ puppet master.”

He went on to say the Four Horsewomen would stake out Stokes’s gravesite, since that would be the focus of the Coven’s dark magic spells probably once darkness fell.

“Meanwhile, I was hopin’ you,” he pointed at Nessa, “would go to the festival site and keep watch on the goings on there.”

He paused, waiting for Nessa’s answer.

What could she say besides, ‘yes’?

She glanced at Pim. He nodded.

“We’ll keep watch,” she said. “Do the Horsewomen have cell phones? Calls are the only way to update everybody quickly.”

“Take out your phone,” Bob ordered. “Margaret gave me hers. She’s in charge of the group.”

The cat recited a cell number Nessa tapped into her Contacts.

“Victoria?” he asked.

“Yes, Mr. Bob?”

“Can you help Miss Nessa and Mister Pim keep an eye on things at Colton Hall?”

“Of course,” she said with a firm nod.

“Oh, Pim and I stopped by the festival last night. There’s three dead soldiers are there. The ones like from your time, Bob. They were much clearer.”

Nessa grimaced, remembering their twisted necks.

Bob shook his head, nostrils flared and whiskers twitching. “Hung from the second-floor balcony those boys. Bad ‘uns. Going to make trouble after dark for sure.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nessa, Pim, and Bob slowly rode Harper's bike to Colton Hall to be there for the Halloween Hexapalooza's start at ten a.m. Nessa grimaced in pain the whole way. Her thigh muscles were not happy campers this morning.

She really needed to exercise more.

The sidewalk was already packed with adults, kids, and babies in strollers. Many if not most were already in costume. The morning was overcast and cool. She was wearing her loose jeans and a long-sleeved Henley under the fleece hoodie she'd packed. Temperatures were always lower here in the north.

Bob had squeezed into the bike basket with Pim, a very tight squeeze. Pim was not a little cat and Bob was one beefy Tom.

She'd detoured by the Stokes Adobe to let him out. Margaret was in the public garden seated comfortably in a folding lawn chair with a little clip-on sun umbrella. The gate was open, giving her a view of the streetside construction site as well as the hidden grave.

She was embroidering.

The witch looked like someone's elderly grandmother, all harmless and innocent.

"Ha!" Nessa said then covered her mouth with both hands. She hadn't intended to laugh out loud.

Margaret snapped her eagle-like gaze on Nessa. She did not say hello.

A sharp gust of wind blew a swirl of dirt and gravel from the hole in the road around Nessa's legs.

'Same to you,' Nessa thought, frowning at the Air Elemental.

Margaret frowned right back.

Sheesh. Did witches with the same Element not get along or something? In Fae, within the Court of Air, everybody seemed fine with each other. Or at least from what Nessa observed during her limited time at Court. Sure, Nessa didn't like the Queen. Yet her reasons had nothing to do with their shared Element and everything to do with the Queen being an evil, self-serving bitch.

Bob hopped out of the bike basket at the garden, declaring he would patrol between Colton Hall and the Stokes Adobe.

Nessa and Pim pedaled back to Colton Hall, leaving the bike locked to a nearby streetlight.

There were several entrances to the festival grounds. Everyone who came through got a wristband so they could go back and forth between the two venues. Nessa wondered if the bands were spelled as well. She wouldn't be surprised.

On the stage, a band of what looked like high school kids had finished setting up their instruments. At a signal from their teacher, they began to play.

Nessa recognized the opening bars of Michael Jackson's Thriller.

A cheer went up as the ropes dropped. Nessa ran closer to observe the exchange of tickets. Only halfway up the brick walkway, she felt ripples of energy washing over her.

The closer she got to the two entrances, the thicker the energy flowed until it was like wading through knee-high water. It was flowing out not in. Pim jumped into her arms. She held him tightly as she pushed against the current. She didn't need to guess where it was heading. The garden by Stokes Adobe.

The spell was in motion.

"Hey, lil' gal," shouted someone.

Lil' gal?

"Bob?" she called looking through the crowd for the Tortie.

He came galloping over causing heads to turn. A big, Tortie cat with one ear and a broken tail was going to draw attention.

He stopped at her feet. Ignoring the push of the magic around her, Nessa leaned down, whispering, "People are looking."

"Let them," Bob said quietly. He was braced against the magic, leaning into it like a windstorm, his eyes squeezed almost shut. Shifting Pim onto her hip, one arm cradled under his stomach, she scooped up Bob with the other. It was a strain to lift him, but she got the big Tom settled on her other hip.

She let the magic push her back the way they'd come to the end of the walkway. From there, the current made a sharp right. Nessa went left, walking until she came to a stand of trees. She set the two cats on the ground, keeping an oak between her and the sidewalk.

"The energy from the tickets is going to Stokes's grave."

"Don't I know it," drawled Bob, giving his fur a shake and licking a patch on his chest back into place.

Pim did the same.

They were both upset. Nessa had observed cats often groomed when they got anxious.

All of them had a lot to be nervous about.

"I want to go around the side. Hit up the front of the Hall, get as close to the ticket booth as I can," she told the cats. "Anywhere outside the fence is open to everybody."

"Fine," said Bob "Mister Pim?"

Pim chirped a meowy "Yes?"

“Maybe you can go in and spy out what’s happening inside. Did ya’ll bring that typing thing?”  
Nessa touched her backpack, “Got it here.”

She’d taken the precaution of wrapping the Speak and Spell in a towel from the bathroom for extra protection before slipping it in her backpack. She had a feeling this would be a rough and tumble Halloween.

“Good. Mr. Pim, come back and report to your girl here. I want to run back to the gravesite. The other witches should be gatherin’ about now. Our witches. Not theirs. I hope,” he added.

With a quick nod, Pim scampered off.

The high school band was now pouring their heart and soul into “I Put a Spell on You,” ala Disney’s movie, *Hocus Pocus*. Nessa could see a vocalist on stage dressed as the iconic witch played by Bette Midler in the film.

“You think you can sneak inside?” Bob asked.

“What?” Nessa said, distracted by the music.

“Inside,” the cat repeated. “Sneak inside for a look around.”

“Probably,” she answered. “Except I don’t think there’s much point. All the magical action is outside. By the entrance. When the people hand over their ticket to enter, permission is granted to steal their energy for the spell. There’s nothing I can do to stop them collecting the tickets.”

Bob gave her a long look with his one good eye. “Course there is. You could do a lot more. You could stop the whole damn thing. Call up one of them tornadoes or a thunderstorm and wreck the place.”

“No!” said Nessa, a little shock running through her at the thought. “No. I cannot. I mean, technically I could, but I won’t.”

“Why not?” asked Bob giving her a squinty eyed stare and curling his good lip. “This is bad.”

Nessa shuddered at such a public display of her witchy power. Sure, she’d called a couple of tornadoes down in LA in her battle against the Soul Eater. That was a whole different story. For one thing, she’d been in a practically deserted cemetery. Plus, the Soul Eater was murdering people. Nessa called the tornadoes to save lives.

This would be different. Putting people in danger risked incurring the Law of Three. No one, magic or otherwise, understood how the Law of Three came into existence but it was there and it was real. The spells you send out can come back to you three-fold. Good or bad. One reason witches using dark magic and black spells deflected the blowback from their spells onto other people or objects. Deflection prevented the blowback from smacking them with three times the force of their spell.

This didn’t really apply to Elemental Magic, according to Grandma’ Hattie. Elementals basically rearranged elements already present: earth, air, fire, and water. Giving them a boost by using their True

Names. Those True Names already existed. Elementals merely spoke them out loud. Very different from following an esoteric ‘recipe’ for a spell or a potion. *But!* And this was a big but. The damage an Elemental spell wreaked could slap you back with the Law of Three if the witch injured or killed innocent people or summoned the energy for their own enrichment.

Here in the middle of a festival? There were hordes of little kids and babies in strollers. The potential for death or injury was far too high. Law of Three or not, Nessa would never risk it.

Bob looked away and spat out, “Harper should have brought someone with more guts.”

Nessa squatted down, poking him in the chest. “Hey, cowboy cat, I have plenty of guts. I’ve been hunted by a Fallen Angel my whole life. I also have brains and understand what we’re up against.”

Which wasn’t completely true. Nessa wasn’t sure what they were going to do to stop this.

“The only reason I’m sticking around is because of a promise I made to protect *you*. Personally, I don’t care about this town or the witches in it. You can all go to hell if you can’t protect yourselves. I’m not a superhero.”

She expected Bob to hiss and call her out after her little tantrum. Instead, he stared at her with his one eye, knotted tail twisting in circles. Finally, he said, “Well, all right then. We ain’t dead yet. Do what you can or what you will.”

Saying no more, he padded silently off.

‘Shoot,’ Nessa thought. She knew herself well enough to understand why she’d lashed out. She was scared and unsure. Until she joined Barracuda Bail Bonds, her magic had been focused either on keeping herself hidden from Frank or helping her dad in his various crooked schemes. This sort of big playing field with an undead demonic serial killer and warring covens plus a town-wide magic circle? This was new territory.

Crap.

“Pull yourself together, Nessa,” she admonished herself. Checking out the ticket booth was next on her Halloween to-do list. “Get on with it,” she growled at herself. “You made the stupid promise to protect Bob. No one held a gun to your head.”

There was an alternate non-magic path around the garden linking up with the staircases and main entrance. Nessa took the un-spelled path, anxious to avoid wading back through the energy current flowing freely from the festival entrances.

This brick path was landscaped all along one side. Shoulder-high bushes and flowers crowded together in a mix of colors and textures.

She cautiously came up behind the ticket booth, one foot in the bushes, ready to duck.

Two women stood behind the booth in conversation. They were both in costume: Long black lightweight dresses, silk probably, with sleeveless, velvet overdresses. Their overdresses, one purple, one forest green, had triangular panels embellished with pearls, tiny jewels, and embroidery.

Both women had long hair falling to their waists in luxurious curls. The one in purple velvet was blond. The one in forest green velvet had brown hair. No hats, witch's or otherwise.

Nessa couldn't see their faces. Not that it mattered. One glance defined them as witches. Power radiated off them like heat waves on a desert road in the summer.

The door to the back of the ticket booth was open. Looking through, Nessa could see another woman inside. A line of people on the other side were waiting to buy tickets.

The festival grounds were crowded and loud with chatter from excited festival goers and music from the stage. Monterey had scored a win for Halloween. No doubt about it.

Too bad they weren't collecting this energy for something good because their spell was channeling like crazy. Maybe the ticket money would go to some worthwhile organization. Unless the witches had tricked the city about who was receiving the money as well.

Some witchy wavelength must have sent a signal as the two women suddenly stood straighter, sending searching glances in all directions. Nessa ducked behind a bush. Unfortunately, they seemed to have heat seeking vision or something like it because they zeroed in on Nessa's hiding place in seconds.

They boldly walked over.

"You can come out, we know you're there," said one.

Feeling foolish and stupid, Nessa stood.

She couldn't be sure if these were the same women who glared at her from the restaurant patio on Alvarado.

"You're the outsider," the blond woman said.

"This isn't your fight," said the other before Nessa could answer.

Nessa kept quiet. They were correct on both statements. What was there to say?

"Are you in league with the Elementals?" asked the blond.

Again, Nessa kept quiet.

"Because if you are," she continued, "we heartily recommend you pack your bags and run back to wherever you came from. We're sick of being policed by a bunch of geriatrics," scoffed the brown-haired witch.

Ah, yes. They meant the Four Horsewomen.

Geriatrics?

These women thought very well of themselves. Too well. Nessa was smart enough to realize how very little she really understood magic. She'd put her money on the older witches.

"Power grows with experience and experience grows with age," Nessa said, quoting her grandmother.

"We could make you leave," said the blond woman menacingly, her fingers already beginning to sketch a sigil.

Pim leaped to Nessa's side, transforming into his werecat alter ego before the women's astonished eyes.

Baring his teeth, he stalked forward, his rumbling growl as loud as a motorcycle revving. They hastily moved back, as well they should.

"You could try," Nessa said ominously. "Go ahead."

Pim's tail lashed furiously. Crowd or no crowd, he crouched, ready to spring at Nessa's signal.

Nessa was not defenseless either. She laid a finger on her summoning belt whispering a name.

Before the other witch could cast her spell, Nessa sent a controlled blast of wind that shot like a cannonball. The impact knocked them onto their skinny butts.

Pim leaped, closing the space between them, placing a front paw on each woman's chest and pressing them into the walkway.

"Don't threaten me," said Nessa, walking to the two prone women. "Whether I want to be here or not is irrelevant. Me and my werecat are here now and we have taken sides."

"Daddy look, look," yelled a high-pitched voice. "A big kitty!"

A little girl of three or four stood by the side of the ticket booth, pointing at Pim. A man joined her and immediately grabbed the girl, yanking her up into his arms with an exclamation of surprise.

"All part of the show," Nessa said easily, waving cheerfully at the man and child. "We're just rehearsing."

Pim backed up to sit demurely by Nessa's side. He raised one large paw and waved like a trained circus animal.

The girl giggled.

Pim rocked back to wave with both paws making her laugh even more. The man relaxed.

"We'll be onstage in a little while. The show is 'The Witches of Monterey.'" Nessa gave the witches on the ground an angry look. "The *Evil* Witches of Monterey. Please come and see."

Waving good-bye as if this was all perfectly normal, Nessa turned her back on the witches and walked away with Pim by her side.



After that, Nessa stayed away from the ticket booth. No use stirring up trouble. If, as Bob suggested, she wasn't willing to summon a Maelstrom and stop the whole thing, there wasn't much she could do here.

The food trucks provided a tasty distraction. Once Pim changed back to his feline form, Nessa ordered a couple of pulled pork BBQ sandwiches from one place and two orders of fries from another. Along with a can of Coke, they sat on the curb across the street with a tree at their back and ate lunch.

Bob stayed away. He was upset with her, no doubt. Monterey was his town and he wanted to defend it. Not to mention the whole personal vendetta thing Bob had against Stokes. The man did murder the cowboy after all. Nessa felt she'd be angry, too.

Together they spent several hours enjoying the entertainment from across the street and observing the crowds of people at the festival. A group of young women around her age walked by. Two had their arms linked. They were all dressed as sexy witches and kept stealing each other's hats and laughing, calling each other out.

Nessa watched until they disappeared into the crowd. They looked like they were having fun. Good friends. Good times. They'd probably known each other for years.

Pim pressed close, sensing her mood. He bumped her under her chin, and she gathered him close, rubbing her face in his soft fur.

"I have you," she whispered.

Nothing strangely magical occurred as they stood guard. Power continued to flow in waves from the Gingerbread ticket booth down the brick walkway and presumably to Stokes's gravesite. Occasionally they got up from their seat on the curb beneath the tree to patrol the grounds.

The two witches Nessa had spoken to were joined mid-afternoon by three other women wearing similar black silk dresses with diamond-cut velvet overgowns in a mix of colors. All richly embroidered and embellished with tiny jewels and pearls. It took Nessa a while before she realized the embroidery created complex magical sigils, enhanced by the jewels and pearls. The symbols must boost the power radiating from the women.

When the five women were together Nessa found it hard to swallow, her chest tight. Halloween was here. Samhain. Like Christmas, New Year's, and maybe your birthday all rolled into one twenty-four-hour period. Joyous or calamitous. Take your pick.

Nessa knew which one the Coven Witches were hoping for.

Pim paced restlessly back and forth as the afternoon wore tediously on, unable to settle. Nessa got a cramp in her tailbone from sitting for too long on the curb.

The energy flowing from the festival was an irritating background buzz growing progressively louder as evening approached and the crowds swelled. More tickets meant more power to the spell.

Sunset was a little after six tonight. Nessa had checked on her phone. Whatever was going to happen wouldn't occur until after dark.

At around five o'clock she and Pim took the bike to the Stokes Adobe and the adjacent garden to see what was going on. If anything.

The place looked pretty quiet, at least from the street. No new holes or signs of battle.

Margaret was still camped out in her lawn chair, embroidery in hand. Nessa didn't see the other Horsewomen. She still hadn't met the fourth member, whatever her name was. Atlanta? Atilla? Aretha? She couldn't remember.

Bob lay stretched out full length under the shade of a flowering bush. He looked like he was sleeping.

A little hesitantly, Nessa approached the elder Air Elemental.

Margaret laid her embroidery in her lap, regarding Nessa with a frown.

"Where are the other Horsewomen?" Nessa asked, not knowing quite how to start a conversation.

"Why?" said Margaret sharply.

Nessa blinked, taken aback. "Wondering. You know. Just wondering. Is anything going on? Do I need to be doing something or search for someone in particular?"

Margaret pursed her lips looking sour. "What's happening at the festival?"

Nessa told her about the brown-haired and blond witches dressed in luxurious costumes by the ticket booth. How they had confronted her and declared they would get rid of the Elementals tonight.

Margaret frowned harder at that, making a sound of disgust. "They said they wanted to get rid of us, did they? We'll see who gets rid of who. Any change in the amount of power flowing from the booth down the walkway to the street?"

"It was pretty strong from when they opened in the morning until around one o'clock. Then tapered off for a bit. Now it's picking up again as evening approaches. There are some events and trick or treating planned from six according to the schedule. More people will come for the lights and decorations and the whole Halloween vibe."

"All right. Go back and keep an eye on things. You have my number?"

Nessa held up her Cell, "Yes."

"Call me when things change."

Returning to the festival she saw the crowds had already increased as the decorative lights, pumpkins, and lanterns were turned on. Everything was electric or battery operated. No real candles.

Victoria joined them when they took up their look out spot on the curb under the tree once again as dusk slowly descended.

Nessa waved and the ghost girl floated over bringing a chill with her. Nessa zipped up her fleece jacket. The girl was like a mobile walk-in freezer.

“The Four Horsewomen have gathered at the garden,” Victoria said.

“Oh really? I was there a few minutes ago and only saw Margaret.” Nessa kept her voice to the barest whisper. No one else could see the ghost or Pim.

“They are assembled,” Victoria said.

“Any change in Stokes’s grave?”

“Yes. The ground is trembling. So little, yet I felt it. The witches felt it. The demon is drinking the magic of the festival. Swallowing the stolen magic.”

“Meow,” said Pim giving a full body shiver.

“I agree,” said Nessa, wrapping both arms around herself. “Do you think he’ll burst out of the ground or will the Coven Witches go to the garden to try and raise him?”

Victoria copied Nessa’s gesture, hugging herself. “I do not know. I am frightened.”

“You and me both kid.”

“Meow, meow, meow,” said Pim.

Victoria held out her hand and opened her spectral fingers. On her palm was a handful of acorns and oak leaves.

“How did you do that?” Nessa asked, staring at the little ghost.

She was holding three dimensional objects. Not shoving them around with a short burst of power. Actually holding them. And she’d kept them hidden as she flew or glided or whatever it was she did.

Victoria looked solemn, pushing her hand closer. “Put these in your pockets. This oak is old and powerful. He will give you strength.”

Gifts had power. Nessa did not know much about earth magic, but she knew enough to accept Victoria’s offering. She put them in the pocket of her jeans as Victoria asked.

“Thank you. Let’s check to see if anything has changed.”

The three of them walked the perimeter of the festival avoiding the ticket booth and the Coven Witches still clustered there.

Cutting through the garden beneath the trees they ran into the specters of the three broken-necked soldiers lurking in the shadows. Nessa jumped. She’d been looking at the festival grounds, not the trees.

They stood silently on the narrow path. It was hard to look at them, their heads were leaning at grotesque angles. Victoria and Pim surged forward protectively.

“Begone, specters,” Victoria said to them. “You are nothing and nowhere.”

Pim hissed, his fur bristling, tail standing straight up. Though maybe the ghosts couldn't see him. They'd sure see him if he changed into his werecat form!

"Stokes," whispered one of the ghosts. "Stokes is comin'."

"So what if he is?" said Nessa. "This magic isn't for you. You're trapped here." Nessa pointed at Victoria, "Like she says."

She didn't use Victoria's name. Alive or dead no use giving ghosts any information.

They leered at her, their faces grotesque, eyes and mouths sagging.

"Not trapped for long," one said.

Making an impatient sound, Nessa waved her hands in front of her and pushed past them. They were nothing but shadows.

At least for now.

With the exception of the dead soldiers, neither Nessa, Victoria, nor Pim could sense anything strange aside from the river of energy running down the walkway. Not that such a phenomenon wasn't strange enough.

They returned to Nessa's curbside vantage point waiting for dark to fall. On the stage a succession of Costume Contests was held for different age groups. Victoria clapped for every division.

Tugging at her white old-fashioned dress, she declared dejectedly she wished she could dress up like everyone else.

'Ah, to be nothing more than ordinary,' Nessa thought to herself.

"Did you celebrate the *Dias Des Los Muertos* When you were alive?" Nessa asked the girl.

"Oh no. We are Spanish. That celebration is not for us. We followed *Dia de los Difuntos* on November 2. It is the same day as the locals chose. For us, though, it is solemn. We visit the cemetery and clean the stones, things like that. If you are far from home, then the family goes to the church to light candles and pray."

"No Ofrendas?" Nessa asked, naming the elaborate decorated altar tables common to the Day of the Dead.

Victoria shook her head.

"No feasts?"

She shook her head again. "No Disney movies either."

They both laughed at that.

"Did people celebrate Halloween in Monterey when you were alive?"

Again, she shook her head. "Halloween began much later." She gave Nessa a wide grin, "It is so fun. I like it very much. Trick or treating. Costumes. Candy." She looked wistful. "Candy especially."

“You know in China, they believe if you buy a replica of the thing a ghost wants like food or clothing or whatever, then burn it at the cemetery, it will appear for them.”

Her eyes grew bright. “Oh, oh, how wonderful. Can we try it? May we? When this is finished. What if it works?”

“Meow,” said Pim earnestly.

“Absolutely,” agreed Nessa. “Let’s give it a go. Is...” There was no delicate way to say this. “Is your grave still here?”

“Oh yes. In the graveyard near the park. The one they call El Estero.”

“Pinky swear.” Nessa held up her hand, little finger up and out.

Giggling, Victoria stretched out her little finger and they pretended to lock them together.

“There,” said Nessa. “Once we take care of stupid Stokes.”

“Yes, yes, once he is gone.” She gave a firm shake of her head. “Gone and forgotten.”

They were watching the call for adults in Tim Burton/Disney’s *Nightmare Before Christmas* outfits when Nessa noticed the brilliant sunset of a few minutes before was fading. Things were going to get messy. Soon.

“I better go to the bathroom,” Nessa announced, getting stiffly to her feet.

Several people passing nearby stared at her.

Oops. They couldn’t see either Victoria or Pim.

“No one’s stopping you,” said a man dressed in a Ninja Turtle onesie.

‘Someone should have stopped you from wearing that costume,’ Nessa thought to herself as she hurried across the street.

Joining the line at the Port-a-Potties, Nessa watched the last rays of an orange and pink sunset fade to black.

In the bathroom she heard a *thunk* on the back of the unit and frantic meowing.

Pim.

More meowing.

A ghostly hand was thrust through one wall.

“Eep!” squeaked Nessa.

The hand, Victoria’s she assumed, beckoned for her to hurry up.

Of course, all heck would break out while she was in the bathroom.

Hurrying to finish and leaping out the door to the surprise of everyone in line, she ran toward the walkway. Pim by her side, Victoria flying ahead.

She felt the wave building as soon as she was outside. A magical tsunami speeding from the festival grounds.

She ran to the streetlamp to get the bike. She tapped Margaret's contact on her cell phone. No answer. Not even voice mail. Pim leaped in the basket.

They raced the wave of magic rolling along the street. Gripping the handlebars hard, Nessa pedaled desperately, dodging cars and pedestrians. Still, she could not beat the energy wave. The Stokes Adobe came in sight as the wave crested and broke.

She braked to a halt and leaped off the bike together with Pim.

Too late.

The gates to the walled garden slammed shut.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Victoria sailed through the gate. In an instant she was back.

“They are here!” she wailed.

Nessa wasn’t quite sure who ‘they’ were. There were rather a number of players currently on the gameboard.

An instant later four loud ‘pops’ like the retort from a big firecracker echoed through the evening quiet.

The wall around the garden was six or seven feet tall. Nessa dragged the bike to the gate. Not caring who saw, though she sincerely hoped there were no security cameras aimed her way. She climbed awkwardly on the frame to the seat and reached up. The gate had thick iron hinges. Lucky for her. Grabbing onto the top of the gate, she scrambled and scraped and managed to pull herself waist high to the top. Pim meanwhile leaped onto the bike basket then easily up and over.

Throwing the upper half of her body on the gate, she swung her legs up and around, and dropped, hoping for a soft landing.

It was pretty soft since two of the Coven Witches cushioned her fall.

“Awk!” said Nessa.

“Eek,” screeched the witches.

Nessa came up swinging. Magic was not the answer to every confrontation.

Nessa had brawled before after her dad put them in yet another questionable situation. She could take a punch and give one thanks to some street fighting training.

Not so the delicate Coven Witches. A flailing kick to the stomach of one of those she’d landed on and an elbow to the face of another gave Nessa enough space to get to her feet.

Two of the Coven’s sisters picked up their fallen comrades. Nessa didn’t wait. She barreled into them, head down in her imitation of a bowling ball. Two fell back in the dirt and another into the arms of her Coven sister.

Yanking the one still standing by her long hair, Nessa snaked a hand around to grip the woman’s wrist. She twisted it behind the woman’s back, forcing her to shield Nessa. Just in time. Another of the Coven Witches, standing away from the melee had the presence of mind to launch a crackling defensive spell.

Unfortunately for the witch in Nessa’s grip, the spell smacked squarely into her chest. The woman collapsed and Nessa let her fall.

A howl from Pim heralded the entrance of the werecat. He pounced on the nearest two and the screaming began.

A pulse of Elemental energy resonated in her chest. The Elemental Witches must be behind her.  
“Duck!” a voice said.

Figuring it was for her, Nessa dropped to the ground.

A burst of wind smacked into four of the Coven Witches who were regrouping, their hands twisted with hexes ready to throw. The witches were flung against the very solid garden gate. They didn’t get up.

More wind whirled around the garden, a funnel cloud that circled the edges. Thunder rumbled overhead; the stars blotted out by towering thunder clouds in a heartbeat. Lightning shot across the sky in blinding zig zag strikes, and the rain fell. A drenching deluge as thick as a blackout curtain.

No rain fell inside the garden.

Margaret had created a distraction to keep people outside the wall from investigating the noise.

Nessa stood transfixed. The elder witch’s control of the air took her breath away. Margaret had conjured this storm in only moments.

Nessa saw Bob standing with the elderly witch.

“Bob!” she yelled. “Get over here and help! The only reason I am here is to protect you!”

“Stokes!” was all she heard from Bob before two lightning strikes exploded practically on top of her. Deafened but not blinded, the strike illuminated two witches closing in on Nessa.

‘How many witches did this Coven have?’ she wondered. There must be a dozen here.

Werecat Pim leaped to her side pouncing on the closest woman. The witch brought her arms up to protect her throat, screaming as Pim dug in his claws.

The other woman scrambled backward, her mouth open and eyes wide with fear.

These witches were going to be very sorry they tried to hurt Nessa. Pim wouldn’t kill this or any of the witches without Nessa’s permission, but they were going to carry scars from this attack.

Victoria flew back and forth between the chaos. There wasn’t much the ethereal puff of spiritual essence could do in the fight.

Three more women in long dresses were standing to the far side the garden. In the darkness, the embellished symbols on their overdresses glowed eerily bright. More light wreathed the women’s hands.

Nessa prepared to jump back into the fight when the ground erupted under her feet. Dirt and debris shot into the air as if propelled by rockets. Nessa was thrown sideways, unable to keep her balance.

The earth bucked and rocked and a howl filled the air.

Screams joined the howl. Not of pain. Of triumph.

Wiping dirt out of her eyes Nessa saw four spectral figures rise from the ground.



Four ghostly women.

Now, finally, she understood. This is what the Mal Paso was created for. Not Stokes. Or at least not wholly. The spell was channeling energy to raise the ghosts of their coven ancestors. Empowered by the Hexapalooza magic, the four Coven Witches had risen from the dead.

These were the women murdered by the Four Horsewomen in the battle to defeat Stokes. Their spirits trapped in the ground as a warning to their Coven and to anchor the spell keeping Stokes in his grave.

Their hair was loose and long, they wore the rags of long skirts or dresses. Their bodies were desiccated, almost skeletal. There was nothing ethereal about their power. It pounded like a kettle drum vibrating right into Nessa's chest. Something dark and evil. An energy Nessa was all too familiar with from her own curse link to the Fallen Angel.

Floating, the four faced off against the Elemental witches. At their backs, the Coven Witches – those who could still walk – gathered, pouring their power into their risen sisters.

Margaret stepped forward. "We put you down once, Witches, and we can do it again."

All four spirits laughed, high and hysterically. "You can try!"

A movement nearby made Nessa spin. One of the Coven Witches was crawling on the ground, trying to creep up on her. Nessa recognized the girl as the young witch from the ticket booth yesterday. Grabbing the witch girl's shirt, she yanked her up, drawing back a fist.

And that's when Stokes's grave itself exploded.

Fist still poised to strike; Nessa paused as she saw Pim fly into the air. He must have been standing right on top of the grave.

"Pim!" she shouted.

"Stokes!" yelled Bob.

A stench of rotting flesh rolled over the garden as a hand thrust up through the dirt.

Stabbing pain seared through Nessa. Hot, burning. Her body was on fire. She began to shake violently, uncontrollably. Her knees gave out. Falling limply, she had time to focus on four prongs sticking out of her chest. The damn ticket booth witch had hit her with Taser bolts.

Amulets aren't much good against a stun gun.

How ironic, she thought right before the world went black, it was exactly the weapon she used against bail jumpers at Barracuda Bail Bonds.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Keep her down...”

“Dump him...”

“Stokes ...”

“Get back...”

“Kill those old bitches...”

Nessa heard snatches of dialog between the deafening buzz of bees who had apparently taken up residence in her head. Was it possible for your brain to vibrate?

Pain ran through her like electric current. Which is what it was. Or the leftover parts. They must have zapped her with a Taser again. Several times probably. Making sure she stayed down.

Damn those Coven Witches.

The voices faded. Not so the buzzing.

She attempted to crack open her eyes. It took several tries.

Dark.

Dark because it was night or dark because she was still unconscious?

Since she hurt too much to still be unconscious, it had to be night. Halloween night.

Taking deep breaths were out of the question she realized after attempting one. Small, short breaths were all she could manage for now.

Is this how everyone felt after getting zapped by an electric bolt? Mr. Barracuda had given her a Taser for protection in her bounty hunting work. She'd have to think twice before shooting someone. They'd really need to deserve it. This was awful.

Her heart was pounding, beating so hard she felt it at the base of her throat. Trying to swallow she realized her mouth was gritty as if she had a mouthful of gravel.

Sand?

She spat as best she could though it was more like a dribble.

Moving her fingers, she felt loose sand at her side.

The Coven Witches must have dumped her on the beach. Why?

She thought or tried to. The bees were leaving; however her synapses were still not snapping very quickly.

Why not kill her and be done with it. These witches didn't seem to have a lot of morals. They reminded her of the Coven she'd encountered in El Segundo. They'd opted to side with a Fallen Angel – not her very own Frank, a different one – running a Curse Club.

The only reason not to kill her outright, not that she wasn't grateful, would be to benefit them.

Benefit or protect the Coven.

Think, damn it.

The Rule of Three? Killing another witch was bad mojo to the Nth degree. The Rule of Three would most certainly come down on them with a vengeance if they murdered her for no good reason.

Dumping her on the beach would get her out of the way while they fought the Four Horsewomen and Bob.

Crap. Bob?

Forget Bob. Where was Pim?

Her throat burned when she tried to speak.

“Pim?” she rasped out. “Pim?”

No answer.

“Bob?”

Nothing.

Stretching out one hand, she called for the cats again before snatching her fingers back as a stinging sensation shot up her arm and into her shoulder like she’d smacked her funny bone.

What now? Was she inside some sort of electric fence?

‘Enough,’ she scolded herself. ‘Lever yourself up and see what’s going on.’

Clenching her jaw and curling her fingers into fists, she forced herself up onto her elbows, allowing herself only the smallest gasp of pain.

‘Now turn over and push yourself to your knees,’ she said to her body.

Her body said, ‘Don’t want to!’

‘Do it anyway,’ she told herself, turning onto her hands and from there getting her knees more or less under her.

In that position she had to pause and catch her breath for a rather long time.

Spitting out more sand, she eased back onto her heels, forcing herself to raise her head.

Oh.

Not an electric fence. Far worse.

Crystals shining a sickly green were set atop slender bleached bones and... she blinked, trying to get her eyes into better focus. Antlers? Yes. Antlers. Deer antlers. All laid out in a complex pattern on the sand. Black lines radiated from the sides. She didn’t need to turn her head knowing there would be at least four more such constructions.

She was inside a Demon Trap. Or maybe a Witch’s Trap since she wasn’t a demon. At least she hoped she wasn’t.

The black had to be ash. Probably from a Yew tree or Rowan. Grandma' Hattie had taught her Rowan ash can be used in banishment spells or for entrapment. Or, worse, she could be surrounded by corpse powder. Corpse powder was a necessary component of many dark spells. Corpse powder would make a very effective Witch Trap.

Whatever it was, the ash would be laid in a pentagram with an inner circle also of ashes. Combined with whatever hexes the Coven Witches had conjured, Nessa was effectively behind an impenetrable stone wall. She could not summon her magic inside the trap. Nothing. Neither her Elemental power nor the legacy from Frank. She was effectively no more or no less than human.

The witches had put her in a trap when they already had rendered her helpless with the Taser bolts.

Was Pim in a trap as well? He had to be. Otherwise, he'd be at her side. Anything else did not bear thinking. He was alive. Nessa would know if he was not. Losing him would feel like losing a limb.

He was somewhere. And could not get to her. Period.

Her sight was clearing though her head pounded and everything felt shaky. She sat back on her butt, putting her hands out to steady herself and she touched it.

Slowly turning her head, she saw she was not alone in the trap. A large, glowing gray mound lay near her. Vaguely man shaped. Light shifted over the mound moving restlessly like oil on water.

Nessa scooted back in the sand. Her hearing had returned, and she heard the crash of breaking waves. Near but not too near. The witches wouldn't want to risk sea water touching their trap.

Staring at the shifting mound of light, Nessa felt a rising sense of panic. Just because the Coven didn't wish to risk the Law of Three for her murder, didn't mean they couldn't stand aside as something else killed her.

If only she'd thought to bring her Faerie Crown to Monterey. What an idiot. She was never safe. She knew she was never safe. Damn it.

It would work even in this Witch's Trap. It was pure Fae magic, something these witches couldn't touch.

Shrugging her shoulders, it was only then she realized she wasn't wearing her backpack. The crown couldn't have helped her anyway it seemed.

The glowing mound shivered. Nessa scooted as far back as she could without touching the edge of the trap.

The sand around the weird mound shifted moving away as if scraped by an invisible hand.

Ever so slowly the glowing mound moved, pulling itself upright into a standing position. It had to be six feet tall if not more. The oily ectoplasm or whatever it was melted away, seeping onto the sand.

And he was there. A ghostly corpse, rags hanging from his body. His eyes were too big, slitted like an animal's, glowing yellow as bright as fog lamps.

The smell of the grave enveloped her.

Stokes. It could only be him.

The Coven Witches had trapped her with the phantom demon knowing the trap rendered her helpless. You can't fight a ghostly demon without magic.

For a time, the apparition didn't move. He hovered silently in the center of the trap.

Nessa could only stare.

Stokes put his hands straight out and charged the invisible barrier of the trap like a bull, as if to push his way through.

The barrier flared brightly, snapping him back like a slingshot to rebound off the opposite side.

He shouted, cursing in words Nessa didn't completely understand. Spanish mixed with Latin, she thought.

He rushed the wall again and again, trying to break out.

"You can't keep me in here!" he bellowed. "We had a deal. You have to free me."

Ah, now Nessa understood. The Coven Witches had bargained with Stokes. His freedom for the spell or power or whatever mojo they needed to bring back their dead ancestors. The four witches the Elementals had defeated and used as anchors for Stokes's grave.

Only he hadn't been clever enough. The Coven Witches said they'd free him but *not* for how long. That was the key. Nessa had learned a thing or two about magical bargains from her time with the Fae.

The Coven Witches had probably waited ten or twenty seconds before grabbing the corpse from the grave, wrapping it in ectoplasmic goo, and rushing it to this Trap, ready and waiting. They weren't cheating. He had been free.

Oh, well played, Coven Witches. Well played. Something for nothing and the tricks are free.

Stokes had not so much as glanced at Nessa. That changed now. He turned his yellow fog lamp eyes on her.

"You're one of them!" he screeched, his voice breaking.

"Actually, I am not," Nessa protested.

Her protest did not matter.

Stokes lunged, moving with uncanny speed. Before she could react, he wrapped his bony hands around her throat, pulling her to her feet.

Nessa gasped, trying to break the stranglehold of the leering specter.

"Think you can lock me in here!" he yelled.

“Not me,” wheezed Nessa.

Stokes held on all the tighter, lifting her feet off the ground. His demonic face leered at her. His black tongue licked his lips.

She punched and kicked but her blows had no effect. It was like punching gelatin.

He was a phantom. How could he hold her like this?

A voice shouted from nearby. “Stokes! You son of a bitch! I’ve got you now!”

Nessa recognized that Western drawl. Bob!

Her sight was beginning to blur from lack of oxygen but it had to be Bob running across the sand, paws pumping.

“Stokes!” Bob hollered.

Stokes swiveled his head Exorcist style, all the way from front to back.

The demonic specter paused, stared, then burst out laughing.

Bob came to a stop a few yards away in a burst of flying sand.

For a few moments nothing happened until she saw the cat lay down and a tall ghostly figure rise out of the chunky body. A man in cowboy hat, chaps, and boots, with a double gun belt slung low on his hips.

Cowboy Bob back on two legs.

“Let go of that little gal,” the spirit said.

Stokes dropped her and she fell to her knees, gasping for breath.

“I remember you,” rasped Stokes. He licked his lips lasciviously. “I feasted on your soul. You were a spicy one.”

“Wasn’t I just,” said the specter.

“Bob?” asked Nessa, looking from the still form of the cat to the cowboy, wanting to be sure.

He tipped his hat like in an old-time movie. “That’s right, Miss Nessa. Present and accounted for.”

Bob the cat. Now ghost Bob the cowboy. Former U.S. Marshal and bounty hunter.

Movement in the dunes caught Nessa’s eyes. Three figures swarmed across the sand. As they got closer, Nessa saw the soldiers’ uniforms.

The hanged men from Colton Hall. They had grown more solid and escaped.

They swarmed toward the cowboy.

Stokes laughed, “Get him, boys.”

Bob faced the soldiers, spit once, and almost lazily pulled out his six guns. Smiling, he shot a short volley of bullets. Six in total, Nessa counted. Three flares of light and pops of sound from each gun.

The hanged men slid to a stop almost comically. Simultaneously all three looked at their chests. A black substance oozed down the front of each ghost. One, two, three, four, five, six holes, two in each of the ghosts.

They swayed, their eyes staring at Bob.

The ghosts began to scream. Their feet dissolved into ash, then their legs, their hips, chests, and arms followed. Finally, their faces contorted and hideous, blurred. The ash took the form of three standing men.

Stokes stopped laughing.

“Know what can kill ghosts, Miss Nessa?” Bob drawled.

Rubbing her throat, still crouched in the sand where the specter had dropped her, Nessa shook her head.

Bob blew out a long breath in an exaggerated motion. The figures dissolved and black ash flew down the beach, scattering in the wind.

“Ghost guns” he said, laughing his wheezy laugh.

Almost lazily Bob reloaded his guns from the ammo belt around his hips.

“Been waiting a long time to see you,” he said, looking at Stokes. “You been causing trouble around this town for far too long.”

The specter’s only answer was a howl of anger.

Nessa saw Victoria speeding across the sand, Pim at her heels.

Her heart leaped. He was all right. He wasn’t hurt. She said a prayer of thanks to the universe and any God or gods who might be listening.

“Miss Nessa,” Bob said. “Get ready to run. Understand?”

Nessa nodded.

Pim transformed into a werecat and threw himself at the nearest pile of crystals and bones, sweeping aside part of the black ash with one paw.

The magic wall trembled and though it didn’t fall, an opening appeared to Nessa’s eyes. With strength she pulled up from somewhere, Nessa threw herself through the opening and ran as Bob said.

She wasn’t able to get more than a few yards away before her legs gave out and she fell in the sand panting for breath. Pim was beside her, howling a challenge at the demonic phantom.

Victoria hovered next to her.

“We could not help you sooner,” she said sounding breathless. Which was funny since ghosts did not need to breathe.

“The Witches shot Mr. Pim with,” she pointed at Nessa. She must mean the Taser. “So many times. He fell. They did the same to Mr. Bob though he did not fall,” she said in a rush. “They put you in an automobile. I followed, then went back for Mr. Bob.”

“Thank you,” Nessa whispered. “I was so scared.” Her hands, her whole body was shaking as she realized she was not going to die in that stupid, evil, trap.

Spectral tears fell from the ghost’s dark eyes. Nessa could have sworn they were real as they dropped to the sand. “The Four Horsewomen,” she sobbed. “It is bad. Margaret brought the wind and carried them all here to find you. The evil witches followed.” She pointed. “There.”

With a quick look Nessa saw bursts of light shooting skyward perhaps a hundred yards away.

“For me?” Nessa asked.

The ghost girl nodded. “To save you.”

Chest tight, Nessa tried to take a deep breath. The Elemental witches hadn’t intended to leave her to die.

Stokes stepped out of the trap. Sickly green flames silhouetted him against the dunes. His hands were wreathed in hexes. They twisted around his fingers looking like black serpents.

He threw the hexes in one hand at Bob. Glowing balls of black energy that sparked and spit.

Bob stood his ground, dipping and dodging the barrage, firing carefully. The specter screamed as one of the bullets hit his arm, then another his shoulder. Black ochre poured from the bullet holes.

Stokes heaved the other ball of energy into the space between Nessa and Cowboy Bob.

Demonic figures rose from the sand.

Pim threw himself at them, all teeth and claws.

Nessa put a finger to one of the symbols on her summoning belt. She was no longer in the trap and she was a Chevalier, god damn it. A Chevalier and a Scott. Chevalier-Scotts do not lie down and cower. No effing way. She would fight.

Nessa spoke the true name of the whirlwind.

Battling the fatigue and pain, she shouted, “Pim, to me!”

Elemental energy coursed through her injured body answering the call of her bloodline.

Pim ran to her side as she spoke the True Name of the wind.

It dropped from the clouds, fully formed, reveling in its power. As she told Doc Ricketts, air thrives on chaos. And damn it, she had some tasty chaos to feed it.

The funnel cloud touched down, a whirling, twirling mass, swaying like an exotic dancer in front of Nessa. She flung it at the demons, commanding the wind to reap them.

The demons tried to evade the tornado’s reach, but you can’t outrun the wind. The twister swallowed them up one after the other.



Joyfully singing out the name of the funnel cloud, Nessa threw her arms toward the churning sea.

The twister rocketed over the sand to the water. Over open water she freed the torrent with a snap of her fingers. It surged back into the clouds, dropping Stokes's demons into the sea. Salt water is toxic to many supernatural creatures. The demons' cries echoed over the beach as the water dissolved them.

She spun around, her attention focused back to the battle at hand. Victoria cowered near Nessa, her hands to her mouth.

Stokes had created a massive ball of flame the size of a car. The heat reached all the way to the water's edge where Nessa stood.

There was no place to hide on the flat beach when he threw it at Bob. The magic would engulf the spectral cowboy.

Nessa hesitated, unsure how to help. Her Elemental magic did not have the same effect on ghostly specters as other supernaturals.

No matter what, there was no time.

Howling, the phantom threw the burning ball of energy directly at Bob.

Victoria flew to Bob's side, hurling herself between the energy ball and Bob. The magic smashed into her in an explosion of flame.

Victoria was illuminated within the hellish energy, her arms outstretched.

For a moment the magical ball glowed even brighter before exploding. The little ghost cried out pitifully and fell into the sand. Her body flickered, and Nessa hoped the damage was only temporary. The ghost would recover. Surely she would not die the True Death. Not here. Not now. After so many years watching over Monterey.

It was a vain hope/

Victoria raised a hand at Nessa and was gone. A flurry of white butterflies rose from the sand fluttering in the shape of a young girl. They flew into the stormy sky out of sight.

"No!" Nessa screamed. "No, please."

No amount of 'please' would bring Victoria back. Nessa knew it.

She'd sacrificed herself to stop Stokes. A promise she'd made so long ago.

Pim howled a long desperate cry, watching the butterflies disappear.

"You're gonna' pay for that, demon," said Bob.

Stokes meanwhile had created another fiery ball, drawing back his hands to hurl the deadly sphere. Magic strong enough to take out a ghost. It would kill Bob for sure.

Pim crouched, readying to pounce but Bob said, "Don't interfere. This is my fight."

Standing his ground, the old ghost cowboy aimed both six guns straight ahead and fired.

There was a moment when all was still. Even the waves seemed to pause.

Nessa held her breath.

The bullets sped through the hexed fire ball and slammed into Stokes's chest.

For a moment, nothing happened. Stokes stared at the two holes as the fireball fizzled to nothing, falling to the sand.

Black ochre began to pour from the spectral wounds. Stokes screamed. Pawing at his chest. His eyes glowed like afterburners on a jet. Green flames erupted from his mouth, engulfing first his face and in a heartbeat, spreading to his entire body.

The specter of Stokes began to turn to ash, exactly as the hanged soldiers.

The man-shaped form of the demon Soul Eater that was Stokes stood frozen in place.

Bob walked over and spit in its face.

The ash collapsed scattering in every direction down the beach.

Nessa stared at Cowboy Bob.

He smiled his crooked, scarred grin.

"Guess that takes care of that," he said with a note of finality.

Nessa stumbled over, her feet dragging in the sand.

"Victoria," Nessa choked.

The sand glowed with a faint white luminescence where the ghost girl had fallen.

Nessa put her hand in the pocket of her jeans, pulling out the acorns and Oak leaves. "For courage," Victoria had said.

The leaves were broken.

Too many broken things.

Nessa laid one of the acorns where Victoria fell, putting the rest back in her pocket.

Bob took off his ghostly hat, holding it in his hands. "I hope she's gone to wherever it is she wanted to go."

Nessa's throat was almost too tight to speak. "She didn't want to go anywhere. She wanted to stay here and protect her town."

Bob didn't answer. What was there to say?

"Thank you, Bob," Nessa told him earnestly. "Thank you for coming. I thought I was going to die."

He settled his hat back on his head, giving her a direct ghostly gaze. "Never let a lady be hurt if I can help it. My momma and pop taught me that back in Arkansas. The strong have a duty to protect the weak."

Pim stayed in his werecat form, walking restlessly around Nessa and Bob.

Lights shot into the sky in the distance bursting in colorful patterns. Run off from the battle going on between the witches.

“Looks like we know what they wanted the spell from that old demon Stokes for,” said Bob.

Nessa wiped her stinging eyes and blew out a long breath. “For sure. They wanted to resurrect the witches the Four Horsewomen killed.”

“And Stokes be damned,” added Bob.

“And me along with him!” Nessa said with feeling. “They knew he’d kill me. Absolving them of direct guilt in my death.”

“They’re a bad lot.”

Nessa nodded agreement and Pim growled.

More lights shot into the sky.

Bob gestured at his ethereal form, “I ain’t gonna’ be much help in that fight. Think you can handle it?”

Nessa gave him a quick once over. “I thought you said ghosts can kill ghosts? The dead Coven Witches are ghosts. Can’t you shoot them?” She mimed firing a gun, “Bang, bang, ex-Witch.”

He raised one hand, placing it on his chest. “I’m a bit ghosted out. Took a few hits from Stokes. Afraid I won’t be much use right now.”

It was true. He was looking more translucent than when he first appeared.

Pim growled, kicking up the sand and making little dashes in the direction of the witches.

He was making it clear he was anxious to join the fight.

They weren’t done yet.

“Miss Nessa,” Bob said.

Nessa faced him. “Yes?”

“They are big, bad witches. It’s going to take some big bad magic to beat them.”

She laughed at his remark. “Lucky for us I am bigger and badder than their worst nightmares.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

With Pim in the lead, Nessa ran across the sand.

Nessa wasn't bragging when she claimed to be bigger and badder. She was. In a quick motion she took the blue contacts from her eyes and slipped them into their case as she ran. Her eyes were far blacker than the night.

Adrenaline surged through her body fueled by anger at Victoria's sacrifice and disgust at the actions of the Coven Witches. She had no time for fatigue or weakness. Not right now.

Without regret, she opened the cage holding her dark self. Her true self, Frank would say. Mentally flinging the chains away was easy, far easier than she would like under normal circumstances.

Her nerves were already frayed from the Taser hits and waking up in the trap with Stokes. The more chaotic her emotions, the easier it was to access the legacy of her mother's bargain with the Fallen Angel.

The darkness screamed at the joy of release, infusing Nessa's tired body with power. Her wings flared out ripping through her shirt and fleece jacket. Fallen Angel wings are not soft and fluffy. They are sharp edged armor, battle weapons to maim and kill.

Spreading her wings, she grabbed Pim and soared into the sky until she had a bird's eye view of the battle.

The Coven witches had the Elementals surrounded by sheer force of numbers. Waves from the sea had been pulled forward by the Water Elemental to pound the dune. The Coven witches were floating on their own version of an air hex where the raging water could not reach them.

Drury was throwing fireballs. Six of the Coven Witches stood shoulder to shoulder to repel the fiery barrage.

A trio of funnels dropped from the sky as Nessa watched. The Coven witches threw shields over the group preventing the wind from sucking them into the storm.

The four spectral Witches raised from the dead were incandescent with power from the spelled festival tickets. They conjured a symbol as big as a bus and threw it at Margaret.

Despite her sister witches shifting their power to shield her, the ghost Witches Hex smashed into Margaret breaking her concentration and throwing her back a good twenty feet.

The funnel clouds dissolved back into the sky.

She dropped Werecat Pim onto the dune. "Wait," she ordered him.

He howled a protest but crouched in the sand, obeying her as she shot back up in the sky.

Earth and Water blocked some but not all of the Coven's attack spells. Nessa saw in alarm that the Elementals' magic was weakening. Each Element took on a different color to Nessa's angelic eyes. Blue,

brown, red, and white. White, for Air, was almost translucent. Brown and blue were also fading. Red, Drury's fire element, alone still burned bright.

The Elementals were failing. The Coven Witches inching forward, closing the circle.

Nessa focused on the four spectral Coven Witches. Much like Bob had said, it takes a ghost to kill a ghost. Or an Angel. Especially the Fallen kind.

For better or worse, Heavenly or Hellish, Angels could command and destroy the living or the dead. Ghosts were no impediment to Nessa in this form.

With her dark angelic self in ascendance, Nessa decided 'destroy' was the correct choice. Put them back in the ground for good. They were already dead. It wasn't murder. Well, not technically.

Arching her wings back, she shot like a crossbow bolt from the sky to land between the ghostly specters and the Elementals.

They howled in rage at her appearance. Right before they screamed in fear.

She was not here for conversation. No small talk, explanation, or excuses.

Spreading her wings, she summoned a song of the true death. A Malediction black and terrible. Burning her lips and blistering her tongue, even in this fearsome form, she spoke the words. They took shape, floating before her. Sweeping her wings forward, Nessa hurled the first verse into their midst.

They fought. Hurling spells at her sharp as daggers.

Nessa folded her wings to shield herself and the hexes rebounded back at the specters. The sharp edges of their own spells cut sweeping holes in their shadowy forms. So much so Nessa could see the lights of Monterey Bay through the slashes.

Smiling, she sang the second and last verse. The Malediction of the True Death spread out like an oil spill to engulf the specters.

Nessa pulled her hands together drawing the oily darkness over them. They clawed at each other trying to escape the black spell's reach.

Nessa laughed, telling them, "You reap what you sow, ladies."

They screamed. Begging their sisters for help and finally Nessa for mercy.

She had no mercy in her heart for these witches. They'd used their magic for evil deeds in life and hoped to continue even after death. Nessa could not allow that.

Remorselessly, she pulled the oily death spell up and over them, abruptly cutting off their cries.

Repeating the last verse of the song, she pushed the black mass into the ground, deeper and deeper. Even if the sea washed away the dune, there would be nothing left to escape. She had dissolved them utterly.

Pim's cry of rage made her spin around to the battle behind her. He'd had enough waiting and had sprung onto the Coven Witches.

The Coven still fought, flinging battle magic at the Elementals.

Some part of her mind recognized this was usually when Pim stepped in, calling her back to sanity.

He was busy going *mano a mano* with two of the witches, trying to rip through their Hex barrier and quite possibly tear out their throats. He was in berserker mode as much as Nessa. Consumed with the death of Victoria and the threat to his mistress.

Five other women faced the Elementals.

Another witch leaped at Nessa. She held a curved dagger. Nessa swept the edge of her wing across the woman's face and shoulder, slicing through the woman's arm and exposing the bone. She cried out in pain, the dagger falling from her nerveless fingers.

"Kill them," whispered the darkness in her soul. "They are evil. Kill them all. Now."

Part of her wanted to do exactly that.

The raging energy of her Fallen Angel legacy was seeping into her body with every heartbeat. It wanted control. The voice of her dark self shouted in her head, demanding, "More! More!"

A pool of inky black surrounded her, and she released a dark spell at the remaining Coven Witches. It hit them with the force of a battering ram. They tumbled and fell, their magic seeping into the sand.

These witches had been prepared to do murder. They'd stolen energy from innocent humans and happily freed a demonic serial killer for their own benefit. Yet, the witches were human. Not innocents maybe, but living, breathing souls. She had no right to kill them.

As Nessa hesitated, Drury threw a wall of fire around the Coven.

Pim dropped his attack, leaping nimbly over the flames to stand by Nessa.

Her wings black and menacing, flexed in and out as she considered the remaining witches.

"You can drop the barrier," she told Drury. Her voice was almost unrecognizable to herself. Deep and husky.

Drury did as Nessa ordered.

Nessa walked closer until she stood in front of the remaining Coven Witches. Pim joined her, baring his teeth and growling menacingly. He had blood around his mouth. Good.

One of the witches started to speak and Nessa slapped her with the edge of a wing, leaving a jagged wound across her face. Fallen feathers were deadly weapons. Each one sharp as a sword.

"Quiet," Nessa commanded.

The witch put her hands over her mouth though she couldn't quite stop the gasps of pain as blood dripped from the wound.

The ecstatic chaos of battle ran through Nessa like an electric charge.

“Vengeance,” the voice in her head shouted. “For Victoria.”

The thought of Victoria fueled the darkness within her. Rage threatened to consume her, and she wanted it to. She did.

A sudden heat in the pocket of her jeans made Nessa gasp.

Reaching in with one hand, she felt the acorns and the brittle oak leaves Victoria had given her.

As soon as she touched them, warmth washed over her. Not the burning heat of her rage. A warmth soft as the rays of the setting sun.

“We are here,” a deep voice echoed in her head. Not Pim’s. Someone else.

“King Oak is here with you child of Faerie. Princess of the Air. Victoria summoned me. Hold us,” commanded the voice.

A white butterfly fluttered around her head.

Victoria.

Victoria had brought these acorns to Nessa. Otherworldly insight into Nessa’s always uncertain future.

Nessa’s heart, her emotional one, not the organ beating wildly in her chest, tightened into a painful knot. Little Victoria who wanted to dress up in a Halloween costume and eat candy. Still a child in so many ways.

‘I hear you, King Oak,’ she said silently, her own rage cooling, ‘and honor Victoria.’

“Be the judge,” boomed the voice in her head. “Be the jury. Do not be the executioner.” After a pause, the voice added, “Not yet.”

“Judge and Jury,” she repeated to herself. “Judge and Jury.” Holding the acorns so tightly she felt them crack, she told herself, “I am an Elemental Witch of the Chevalier House and my father’s daughter. Not my mother’s.”

Swallowing the curse trying to leap out of her throat and slay the Coven Witches, she turned her inky black eyes on them.’

‘Judge and Jury,’ she silently repeated.

“I could kill you all with a word,” she told them, her voice a rumbling roar that made the dune shift beneath their feet.

The women cowered. Confronted by Nessa’s dark energy and the true death of their spectral companions, they had no swagger, no bravado left.

They knew they faced death at Nessa’s whim.

The Elementals stayed back, saying nothing.

“I will not kill you today,” Nessa spat at them, putting stinging energy into every word so that the witches gasped and cried out in pain. “Be grateful. But know I can come back. If you are stupid enough to

practice any such magic again, I will return.” She gestured to the pile of blackened sand where she had buried the ghostly remnants of their Coven. “And you will join them. This is a promise, not a threat. You are witnesses. I command the power of the Fallen. Now get out.”

She put power in those last words. They hit the women with the strength of a steam shovel, sending them tumbling and somersaulting off the sand dune and out of sight until their cries of pain and fear faded away.

“Well, that’s an interesting look,” said Mei, regarding Nessa, her hands on her hips.

“I kind of like it,” laughed Drury putting out a hand, obviously wanting to touch Nessa’s wings.

Nessa pulled her wing back, “Don’t,” she warned Drury. “They’re sharp.” And they were. The edge of the feathers gleamed like razors.

“You scared the heck out of me and your on our side,” said a witch Nessa didn't recognize. This must be Alberta. The fourth member of the Horsewomen. She still had an earthy brown glow around her to Nessa’s eyes. Earth Elemental.

The four Elemental Witches stood facing her.

And Nessa saw them.

Really saw the women for what they were.

What she saw, made her gasp.

Ghosts couldn’t hide from her in her Fallen state, no matter how powerful. She saw through spells and conjuring to the truth of many things she would rather not.

The only living being among the four Elementals on this sand dune was Margaret.

The other three were ghosts.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

She was so surprised at the revelation; her terrifying black wings shrank to nothing. Almost without thinking, she grabbed hold of her dark energy, shoved it back into its mind cage, replaced the mental chains and locked it away before it had time to squeak in protest.

Pim remained in his werecat form, placing himself between Nessa and the Elementals. Wary growls rumbled deep in his chest.

“Ghosts,” Nessa gasped, staring at them. “Three of you. Dead. I...you...” They’d manifested so strongly; Nessa had never guessed they weren’t still alive.

She took a deep breath. “Dead but not dead and buried, right?”

The three specters looked at Margaret.

“Correct, Miss Scott,” Margaret answered. “We took measures. We couldn’t leave the city unprotected.”

Dead. Not dead and buried. Nessa had spent a lot of time studying magical deaths since she grew old enough to understand her own curse and the Scott gift of seeing the dead. The women’s bodies were still somewhere, intact, hidden away like those mummified Tibetan monks.

Their bodies tied them to this world, enabling them to fully manifest their Elemental power. Margaret as the anchor.

“What about when you die?” Nessa asked Margaret bluntly.

“When my time comes, I will join them. In death as in life.”

Nessa shook her head. “That won’t work. You’re their anchor. The reason they can manifest,” she waved a hand up and down, “like...like *this*. Right down to their track suits and New Balance walking shoes. Who will become the anchor if you die? Who will protect Monterey?”

Margaret didn’t answer at first. After a long pause and meaningful looks at her Witch sisters she said, “We have another anchor in the wings. She can take my place and we will continue to protect the Central Coast with her help.”

Nessa thought about Bob’s connection to the Four Horsewomen and Doc Ricketts. “It can’t be Bob,” she said. “He’s a cat. ”

Pim rumbled.

“Not that magical cats aren’t powerful,” she added hastily.

Who or what else was a common denominator.

Stokes. Elementals. Bob. “It’s not...it’s not Harper, is it? Harper Garde?”

Their faces showed Nessa had guessed right.

“Why wasn’t she here tonight? Helping you fight?”

The four women looked at each other, having some sort of silent confab. Mei was the one who spoke up.

“We couldn’t risk anything happening to her.” She gestured at the state of the dune. “If you hadn’t been here, things might have gone differently. The Coven Witches don’t know about Harper. We want to keep it that way as long as possible.”

Nessa’s mouth dropped open. “Oh-my-God. This was a set up?” her voice broke on the last word. “Fionna and her cousin made this happen so I would be your back-up?”

Pim hissed, baring his fangs.

The four witches took two steps back.

“And Bob’s,” said Alberta.

“Fionna holds your magic in high regard,” Drury said placatingly. “And your Familiar’s.”

“Power not often seen in this world,” Margaret said. A little begrudgingly, Nessa thought.

“For good reason,” she snapped. “Forget your nasty Coven Witches. None of you have any idea what you are playing at messing with me.”

The four had the good manners to look contrite, shuffling their feet in the sand.

“Is, um,” Mei started, “Stokes dealt with? Or did he escape?”

Nessa threw her hands up in the air, “Now you ask about that maniac? We lost Victoria because of him. She’s gone.”

Margaret put her hand to her mouth, “No.”

“Yes. She sacrificed herself for Bob. Protected him so he could finish Stokes off.”

“Bob,” said Drury.

“Yes,” Nessa said impatiently. “Bob.”

“Bob the cat?” asked Margaret.

“No, of course not Bob the cat,” Nessa answered. “Cowboy Bob. He shot Stokes with his six guns. He said only a ghost could kill a ghost.”

“Oh no,” said Alberta.

“Oh no,” echoed the others.

“He’s correct,” said Margaret. “But it’s a one-way trip.”

Nessa didn’t wait to hear any more. She ran down the dune.

Cowboy Bob stood looking at the still form of the big, ugly cat.

Nessa dropped to the sand by the cat. She laid a finger on his furry throat, hoping for a pulse. Even a flicker.

Pim flipped back to his feline form, sniffing the other cat. Meeting her eyes, Pim shook his head.

“Bob,” she whispered.

Cowboy Bob knelt next to the still form. Reaching out a ghostly hand he ran it over the body. “He was a right ornery, damn good old cat.”

Nessa’s eyes stung “Oh, Bob. I am so sorry.”

And that was the truth. Phantom Stokes would have strangled her. She had been powerless against him inside the Witches Trap.

Bob shifted his touch from the cat to Nessa’s arm. She felt a cold tingling where his fingers lay.

“Don’t go blaming yourself now. I’ve been waiting to pay Stokes back for more than a hundred and fifty years. This was my fight from the start. Dang glad to have you as a deputy. Witches come out all right? Ours, I mean.”

She swiped her eyes on the shoulder of her fleece jacket, rubbing away the tears. “Yes. I dealt with the ghost ones and hopefully scared the others straight. Or at least encouraged them to move to another city. Bob...what...happens now?”

He resettled his cowboy hat and shifted his gun belt. “The devil hasn’t got me quite yet, I reckon. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes as they say.” He gestured at the beach. “Stokes’s ashes ain’t coming back. But dust to dust? Well, let’s just say dust ain’t the end for someone in my particular situation. We’ll meet again, Miss Nessa, Mr. Pim. Either on this side of the veil or the other.”

A dozen white butterflies appeared, circling Cowboy Bob.

He tipped his cowboy hat and gave her a jaunty wave, “Adios amigos!”

His form turned to a shimmer of silver dust.

In a heartbeat, he was gone.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Four Horsewomen hung back until Cowboy Bob was gone, the butterflies following him.

Margaret knelt by Nessa, gently stroking the still form of the big, ugly cat. “Let us take care of the cat,” she said. “We’ll hold onto to him so Harper can have a proper goodbye.”

Nessa blew out a long breath. She was tired. Pim nudged her and she felt him trying to give her some of his energy. The poor cat had nothing left to give.

“We brought your backpack.” Margaret shrugged off the shoulder straps, handing Nessa her black cotton backpack.

Nessa’s spirits soared at the sight of it.

“It got left behind after they Tasered you,” Mai said. “We knew it must be important.”

“It means everything. Thank you. Thank you.”

Unzipping the top, Nessa checked inside. Everything was there, though covered in salt. The bag of sea salt had spilled open in all the jostling. No matter. The Speak and Spell was wrapped in a bath towel, it would be fine. The salt wouldn’t bother her Bone Brush. The magical item could only be activated with blood.

“Where am I?” Nessa asked as she slung the backpack onto her own shoulders. “How do I get back to Harper’s place?”

Margaret stood, holding out her hand. “I’ll get you there. Come with me.”

A little hesitantly, Nessa grasped the woman’s hand.

“Hold your cat,” Margaret said. “Tightly.”

Unsure of what was going on, Nessa nevertheless grabbed Pim firmly around the stomach.

Before she had time to take a breath, they were in the air, skimming over the beach.

“Flying?” Nessa choked. “You’re flying.”

“What did you expect?” Margaret sounded far to matter of fact for someone soaring a hundred feet off the ground. “I’m an Air Elemental. Don’t you?”

“No!” choked Nessa. “I don’t.”

“Well, you better learn, young lady, hadn’t you,” she said shortly.

The elderly witch gently dropped them off on the sand dune directly in front of Harper’s townhouse. Soaring on her spirit wind, she did not say so much as a goodbye, winging away back the way they had come.

Nessa half-climbed; half-fell over the fence separating the townhouse from the beach. The Jack O’Lantern still lay by the foot of the stairs where Bob had knocked it.

A stitch in Nessa's heart made her pause. The talking pumpkin had been the beginning of all this mayhem. Reaching down, she righted the pumpkin before climbing the stairs and keying in the code to open the door.

Inside they both had a long drink of cold water.

Nessa knew she should probably eat something, but she didn't have the will power.

Pim pawed at her leg, signaling he wanted to speak.

She pulled out the Speak and Spell, setting it on the couch. She collapsed onto the cushions next to it.

"Bob the cat left a letter for Harper," the synth voice said as Pim swiftly tapped the keys.

"He left a letter for what? For Harper? When?" Nessa asked.

"While you were in the shower last night. He dictated it to me. Asked me to print it out if things went badly. They have a WiFi printer in the other guest bedroom. Bob gave me the password."

"O...okay. Let's do it."

They went upstairs together. The printer was where Bob told Pim it would be and the password worked without a problem.

They printed out one sheet of paper and took it to the dining room table.

Neither Nessa nor Pim pretended they were not going to read it.

'Dear Miss Harper,' it started.

'Well, here we are. Both of us always knew we'd have to part one day and I guess this is it. Just know I went with my guns up and fighting the good fight.

I know I was not an easy partner, course you had your faults too.'

Nessa and Pim both laughed at that. It was so Bob, both cat and cowboy.

'And that no account boyfriend of yours? Ditch him. You deserve better.

I am grateful, Miss Harper, I had many good years with you and some dang good adventures.

I may not be a cat anymore but I ain't gone.

Dust to Dust, Ashes to Ashes. But dust ain't the end.'

Bob had said those same words on the beach.

'Lord willing, I will find a body and make my way back. So, keep an eye out for an old cowboy, will you?

Love and respect,

Robert Allen Fitzgerald'

They set the letter down. Nessa went to the mantelpiece where she and Pim had set up their little Samhain memorial to Grandma Hattie.

She brought it to the table and put the photo, candy, and flowers, next to Bob's letter. From the kitchen she got some of his cat treats and a little bowl of fresh water and set that on the table as well.

Surveying the memorial, she realized something was missing. Getting a glass from the cupboard, she poured it to the top with Bob's Kentucky Bourbon. Nessa set it on the table by the cat treats.

"We miss you, Grandma' Hattie," Nessa said, giving the photo a kiss. "And we will always remember you, Bob. You saved our lives. If you find a way back, I owe you."

The next day, Sunday, they printed out pictures of cute Halloween witch costumes and lots of different candies. Nessa also included pictures of pretty hair ribbons in bright colors, cut them out, and put them in a little plastic bag.

They went into the garage and found a small earthenware flowerpot. Along with a box of matches scrounged from the kitchen, they loaded everything in a tote bag and headed out. Their first stop was walking to the garden that held Stokes's grave, hoping Harper's bike was still there.

It was. The gates to the garden were closed keeping Nessa from seeing what sort of state they'd been left in after the battle.

Last night before bed, Nessa looked up the graveyard Victoria told them about. The graveyard had a searchable online website. Nessa was impressed. There were several families with the same last name. Once they got to the cemetery, they found Victoria and her family on their third try.

It was a family plot with a list of names, including Victoria.

Nessa laid a hand on the gravestone. "Hi, Victoria. I am so sorry you had to leave before you were ready. You saved Cowboy Bob and he killed Stokes. Really killed him. The True Death. You're a hero."

"Meow," said Pim. He rubbed his head gently against the stone.

"Remember I told you the Chinese burn paper objects they think the ghosts might want? I don't have 3-D ones. Instead Pim and I printed out some things we thought you might like."

Taking out the flowerpot, Nessa, watched by Pim, put the cut outs inside, lit one of the matches and waited until they burned to ash. Crumbling the ash into dust in her hands, she sprinkled it over the grave. In her pocket were the crumbled bits of acorn and oak leaves. She laid them on the grave as well. The little ghost had been right, they did give Nessa courage. Courage to return to herself and not slay the Coven Witches. No matter how much they might have deserved it.

"I'll try and come back again sometime to say hello. Pim and I will never forget you, Victoria. Never."

As she stood, brushing bits of dirt off her jeans, a dozen white butterflies surrounded her and Pim. Fluttering around their faces before disappearing into the air.

Nessa sniffed, brushing roughly at her eyes. Picking up Pim, she hugged him to her as they walked back to the bicycle.

From the cemetery they rode to the train crossroads and the Doc Ricketts statue. She and Pim agreed they'd tell Doc Ricketts about Bob. They didn't know what the ghostly grapevine was like in Monterey. Since he was limited to a few blocks in either direction of his memorial, he might not know.

Slowly walking the bike along the streets of Doc Ricketts's route, they found him sitting on a bench around the corner from the Aquarium, smoking.

She and Pim had to wait for a break in the bicyclists, tourists pedaling wacky carriage bikes, and rec-trail walkers before she could say anything.

"Hey Doctor Ricketts," Nessa said politely, sitting next to him. "I have some hard news."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Bob?"

"Yes," she said on a long exhalation of breath. "He took out Stokes and saved my life."

The handsome ghost nodded slowly, "Sounds like ol' Bob. He was a good son of a gun. Best cowboy cat I ever met."

Pim meowed, also nodding his head.

"A good cat and a great cowboy," Nessa added.

"Yep," agreed Doc Ricketts.

"Pim and I are going to spend the day at the aquarium."

"How about I meet you there?" he said, surprising her. "Give you two a tour."

A walk-through with a marine biologist? Heck yeah!

Pim and Nessa gave each other high-fives.

Tickets were costly. As in, 'Gulp!' prices. Luckily Nessa had her student I.D. and money left over from Harper's food budget since they barely ate yesterday. Pim, of course, was free.

It turned out to be a worthy splurge. They spent hours following Doc Ricketts around, listening to him describe the exhibits and beautiful watery habitats. The ghost seemed happy to have an audience.

There were so many people it was almost impossible to have real conversations since she would appear to be talking to herself. She kept Pim in her arms much of the time so he wouldn't get stepped on. The jelly fish hall and nearby exhibits were dark enough she could ask questions, and no one noticed.

The free-falling Medusa jelly fish and the Moon Jellies were mesmerizing. She and Pim agreed it was one of their favorites.

Pim especially liked the silly, playful sea otters. Nessa liked the towering Kelp Forest exhibit and the giant Open Sea tank with tuna, sea turtles, and hammerhead sharks.

Doc Ricketts kept up a fascinating running description of the fish and the eco-systems of the sea and shore.

Food, unfortunately, ended up being crazy expensive. Like, eye popping. Nessa and Pim agreed to wait until they left to get something to eat.

Around three, as they were waiting to try and pet the little bat rays, Nessa got a call from Margaret of all people. The one living member of the Four Horsewomen.

“Hello?” Nessa said suspiciously.

“Hello, how are you today?” she said sounding far more friendly than in their previous conversations.

“Fine, I guess. Pim and I went to the cemetery to thank Victoria. Then found Doc Ricketts to tell him about Bob. We’re at the aquarium with him right now.”

“A guided tour. How very nice. I was wondering if you’d like to meet for a meal?”

“Um,” was all Nessa could manage at first. She met Pim’s eyes shrugging her shoulders.

He gave her the feline version of the same.

“Why?” she said at last. Might as well be blunt. “We’re going back to Los Angeles tomorrow. And, well...” she puffed out her cheeks. “I don’t think you like me.”

Margaret didn’t say anything for a time.

“I won’t talk about what you saw. With my wings and all,” Nessa said at last. “If that’s what you’re thinking.

“Do you like Fish and Chips?” the woman said apropos of nothing.

“Yeeess,” Nessa answered guardedly.

“Why don’t we meet in an hour if you’re ready to leave the aquarium then. At the Sea Harvest. Very casual place up on Foam. Doc Ricketts can show you. Tell him to come. If you’re amenable.”

Nessa waited for Pim to say yes or no. He was an excellent judge of character.

“Meow,” he said, making a go forward motion with his paw.

“Okay, we’ll see you there.”

And they did.

The other three Elementals were in attendance, though Nessa wasn’t sure if anyone else could see them. To her and Pim they appeared totally real. Doc Ricketts greeted them warmly.

Margaret bought plates of fish and chips for herself, Nessa, and Pim. Smothered in vinegar, they tasted heavenly.

Much of the talk centered on remembering Bob and his adventures with and without Harper.

As they finished the last of their dinner, Margaret brought up what Nessa figured was the real reason for this meeting.

Dabbing at the side of her mouth with a linen handkerchief, no paper napkins for her, she said, “I would appreciate it if you did not mention me to the Queen of Air the next time you are in the Fae world.”



Nessa and Pim exchanged puzzled looks. “How do *you* know *I* know the Queen of Air?” she asked.

Afterall, her Fairie crown was back in LA and all her magical paraphernalia was from this world.

“Your aura. It is, how can I put it, different from mine as an Air Elemental. You’ve been to Fairie. Taken the vow. It shows.”

Now Nessa was worried. “Can every witch see? Is it so obvious?”

“No, no. Only because I, too, am an Air Elemental and quite an old, experienced one. I would very much appreciate it if you would not mention me at Court. I have succeeded in staying hidden this long, I would prefer to keep it so.”

Nessa couldn’t think of any scenario where she would bring up Margaret and Monterey to the Queen. Nevertheless, she agreed to keep quiet about her and the other Elemental witches.

“Thank you,” Margaret said rising from the table. “And thank you from all of us for your help. We could not have succeeded without you.”

Mei, Alberta, and Drury all agreed Nessa and Pim fought magnificently.

And they left.

Doc Rickett’s tipped his hat to Nessa as well and faded away.

The next day was long and uneventful. They locked up the house and called a Ride Share to the Airport Shuttle stop. She also texted her schedule to Aunt Emerald, telling when she should be home.

On the bus back to the airport in San Jose, Nessa had mixed feelings staring out at the strangely empty dunes.

She’d come thinking it would be a fun holiday. Instead, two people she’d only begun to know lost their lives. You didn’t have to be fully corporeal to still enjoy living.

They’d battled an energy sucking spell running through the city. Fought a soul-eating ghost risen from the grave and nearly died in a Witches’ Trap. Not the vacation dreams are made of. More like nightmares.

Los Angeles would seem positively placid compared to this place.

Both she and Pim breathed a sigh of relief when their jet touched down at LAX.

As they wearily walked from their gate toward the exit, she got a text message.

Jun Hee.

‘I’m here at the airport,’ it read. ‘Outside arrivals.’

Oh no, what had her fairies done now?

She and Pim walked as fast as they could to the arrivals exit. Jun Hee’s green 4X4 was by the sidewalk. One of the uniformed LAX parking police was stridently blowing her whistle, waving at him to move on.

Spitting out the whistle, the police officer shouted, "You can't wait here."

"But..." Jun Hee started to say.

"I'm here!" Nessa said, waving both arms."

Jun Hee pointed, "See, there she is."

Putting her whistle back in her mouth, the police officer blew it at a different car.

Nessa jumped in the front seat, Pim right after, settling himself on her lap.

She craned her neck around to look in the back. Jun Hee usually kept the back seat folded all the way down for more room. "Where are they? What happened?"

"Who?" Jun Hee asked, looking in his rear-view mirror and easing into the chaotic stream of traffic that defines LAX terminals.

"My fairies. What have they done?"

He managed to pull into the far lane. "Today? Nothing. Halloween was a different matter. How you put up with them is beyond me."

Nessa narrowed her eyes, looking intently at him, "Why are you here then?"

"Your Aunt told me when you were coming back and your flight. I figured you'd need a ride."

"I was going to take the bus," she said truthfully. She'd left the money they hadn't spent on food and expenses back at Harper's. After what happened to Bob, it didn't feel right to profit from her invitation. They'd kept the shuttle reservation since it didn't feel usurious.

"Figured," said Jun Hee, keeping his eyes on traffic and his mirrors. Getting out of LAX was always an adventure. Not a fun one.

"You came to pick me up?" Nessa said feeling unsure of herself.

"Sure. You must be worn out. Murder cat, too."

Nessa was too tired to bristle at the term. Jun Hee had picked up Pim's nickname from Fionna.

"What do you want?" Nessa said. "What's going on?"

Up to now, they hadn't really had what she'd call a friendly relation. Except for saving him from the cursed witch murdering the men in his family, they were generally rivals.

He frowned at her, "Nothing's going on. What? A guy can't be nice?"

"It's you!" she blurted out before she could stop herself.

"Hey!" he protested.

Nessa instantly felt contrite. "Sorry. Only, you know, we don't hang out."

Jun Hee made a face and said nothing.

Nessa looked in the back again, "Where are your quail buddies?"

Jun Hee was good with birds. He had a magical covey of hand-raised California Quail he used in tracking. Nessa had seen them in action when she was fighting the Soul Eater a few weeks ago.

“I left them in the garden to get some exercise. I made a fenced in covered run to keep them safe from hawks and cats. There’s bushes and dirt and all the things quail like.”

Negotiating traffic, they made it safely onto the Pacific Coast Highway. Pim breathed a sigh of relief and Nessa joined him at the sight of the hotels, drugstores, fast food places, and strip malls crowded together. On both sides of the busy boulevard. It was good to be back in the urban wasteland of the South Bay.

The day was hot and sunny. True autumn was still weeks away for Southern California.

“Want to grab a burger before I take you home. You look...” he paused, “thinner than usual.”

He wasn’t wrong. Neither she nor Pim had eaten much today.

They pulled into a MacDonalds, parked, and went inside to order. On the patio, Nessa cut Pim’s double cheeseburger and fries into tiny cat-sized bites. He hopped up on the table to eat. Nessa and Jun Hee angled their bodies so he was mostly screened from anyone going into the Drive-Thru.

“Tell me what you were doing up in NorCal, Sounded intense.”

“It was.”

Between devouring her own burger and fries, she told him about their misadventures with the Mal Paso, Bob the cat, Stokes the demon, and Doc Ricketts.

Jun Hee was from Colorado and only a few years older than Nessa. Handsome, muscular, and tall. He’d come to Los Angeles to confront her boss, Roman Barracuda, about stealing away one of his bounties. After a certain time passed, it became open season on Bond Jumpers. Anyone could claim the bounty if they caught them.

Jun Hee ended up deciding to move to the South Bay and work for Barracuda Bail Bonds, declaring LA was far more fun than Denver. He could throw down a magic circle like nobody’s business as well as brawl with the best of them. He’d been a perfect fit for the agency.

Nessa complained about her forced servitude with Barracuda Bail Bonds, yet she’d been unaccountably jealous when Jun Hee became Barracuda’s Golden Boy.

From MacDonald’s it was only a short drive to Aunt Emerald’s and Nessa’s apartment above the garage.

“Thank you so much for picking me up,” she said in complete sincerity. Usually, her tone with Jun Hee was snarky, to say the least. Jun Hee had also insisted on paying for lunch.

Nessa thanked him for that as well.

Though still tired and sore from their battles, physical and spiritual in Monterey, she and Pim felt a little better after Jun Hee let them off at Emerald’s front gate.

He declined to come in, saying he had a runner to get after and wanted to pick up the quail posse.

They went through the gate, easily crossing the thick wall of Threshold Wards Emerald had surrounding her property. Nessa's little orange scooter was parked in the driveway.

She gave it an affectionate pat as they slowly ascended the stairs.

She hadn't even reached the top step when the door flew open with a *bang*.

Fionna jumped out, pointing an accusatory finger at Nessa, shouting, "You killed my cousin's cat!"

Oh crap!

## FROM THE AUTHOR

Monterey is full of ghost stories. One reason I chose the location for Nessa and Pim's Halloween hex-fest adventure.

Colton Hall is a real place, just as I've written it, and has its share of hauntings. They actually hung men from the balcony even though there was a school on the first floor. Apparently, school got out early when there was a hanging so the children wouldn't watch.

I am in and out of Monterey all the time. Since learning this, there is no way I am ever going to Colton Hall again.

Also, I made up the Hexapalooza Halloween Festival and it being held there, though it's a good idea. Minus the ghosts and cursed tickets, of course.

The 'Mal Paso' is from a local legend with some ghostly voice chanting it back in cowboy days. Victoria, too, is based on a young ghost who supposedly haunts one of the buildings downtown. Her death at Stokes's hands is my embellishment, however.

What's truly frightening is James Stokes was a real person and did buy the Adobe from Tomlinson. An army deserter, he claimed to be a pharmacist and doctor. A number of untimely deaths are said to be at his hands. You can visit the Stokes Adobe. It has been home to several elegant restaurants and many locals will agree it is haunted, though oddly not by Stokes. That's one reason I put him in the imaginary garden nearby.

Though I can't say if Doc Ricketts haunts the train crossing there by Cannery Row, he really did meet his fatal accident there on the tracks. The memorial is exactly as I described it. They even left a few feet of track along with the crossing signal.

The area has more ghost stories, and some enterprising people conduct ghost tours of the city if you are interested.

In the story, I refer to Nessa and Pim's battle with a Soul Eater when she was forced to raise several tornados in Los Angeles cemeteries. This is from their adventures in *Girl's Guide to Voodoo Bounty Hunting, Book 4: Ghosted*.

Also, her taco loving trio of chaotic fairies are recurring characters, first appearing in *Girl's Guide to Voodoo Bounty Hunting, Book 2: Shifty Business*.

Happy Halloween!



