

ABRA CADAVER
A CURSED OBJECTS STORY



EDEN CROWNE

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Table of Contents

<u>CHAPTER ONE: HOCUS FOCUS</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWO: PRINCE OF PEEVES</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>CHATER THREE: FIGHTING DIRTY.....</u>	<u>12</u>
<u>CHAPTER FOUR: GRIT AND BARE IT</u>	<u>19</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIVE: HIDE AND FREAK.....</u>	<u>22</u>
<u>CHAPTER SIX: BLOOD COUNT</u>	<u>27</u>
<u>CHAPTER SEVEN: A STITCH IN TIME</u>	<u>30</u>

CHAPTER ONE: HOCUS FOCUS

Riley O’Ryan, Curse Breaker and lead Private Eye at R.I.P. investigations – okay, only investigator at R.I.P. because supernatural cases tended to end in horrific death – loaded her dog Prince into the little red Yaris and prepared to meet the day. Prince was more demon than dog. Generally, he looked like an oversized black Belgian Shepherd. Long-haired, tall pointy ears, wolf-like. Once he transformed, the sharp spines and second set of teeth were kind of a giveaway that this was not a normal dog.

Prince was her bodyguard, supernatural warning system, and four-footed lethal weapon rolled into one slobbery package. His full name was Prince Machiavelli Spawn of the Devil because he had been a very bad puppy. He was also one reason she had survived to the ripe old age of twenty-five. She had taken over R.I.P. while still in her teens following the death of her father at the hands of demons and disappearance of her mother.

Riley was a Blood Witch. A hereditary member of the Thirteen Families, arguably the most powerful coven in the history of witchcraft.

Thirteen Family Witches worked in every industry. Non-magical humans would be terrified to learn just how much magic played into the global economy. They also protected very ungrateful norms (normal humans) from whatever crawled, walked, or slithered out of the supernatural substrata.

Today, Riley had been called into a large construction site with some nasty problems. To underestimate it. Amelia Nordquist a Corporate Witch (also a member of the Thirteen Families) with a multinational real estate developer was overseeing the project. She described it to Riley succinctly as, ‘a major black magic cock-up.’

“My people reviewed the land’s history. It seemed totally innocuous enough at the time,” Amelia told her over the phone on their first call. “There is some organized neighborhood opposition to the project. Nothing magical. A competitor expressed anger at losing the bid to us hinting that we had exerted some unfair pressure to secure the job.”

Given that Amelia Nordquist was CMO, Chief Marketing Officer, and very adept with a spell, Riley felt that accusation probably wasn’t too far off. R.I.P. had worked for the corporation on contaminated sites before and Riley was familiar with the skills of the formidable Ms. Nordquist.

“They made some veiled hints at retaliation,” she’d continued, “but I don’t think they’re savvy enough to hire witches to hex the job site and this is definitely magic. What I think is that the staff

member who made the original assessment of the site as clean had his head up his ass. He is no longer with my office.”

‘Or perhaps on this Earth,’ Riley said to herself.

The project was a large, low-cost housing unit of around forty duplexes centered around a small park and playground. Both government and private sources were being used to fund the job and it had received a considerable amount of publicity since new low-cost public housing that did not consist of cardboard boxes and blue plastic tarps were somewhat hard to come by in LA County.

Trouble had begun as random bad luck here and there and escalated into serious anarchy including collapsed foundations, cement that would not harden, fires, sink holes, machinery breakdowns, and multiple injuries. The day Amelia Nordquist contacted Riley, a crane had toppled over smashing the on-site office right down the middle and killing two people.

“We didn’t feel anything before construction began,” Amelia explained in the call. “Or should I say my *assistants* didn’t feel anything. This is more of a PR venue for our firm. Low-cost housing is one of those feel-good giveback things to put in the pamphlets and write off on taxes.” At least she didn’t try to dress it up as true altruism. “I hadn’t been out to the site until today,” she paused. “I can’t say it was obvious to me what’s wrong with the land. There is something though. Something dark and elusive beneath the surface. Too clever for me to pin down. We’re burning money on this. We need the site purified ASAP.”

They’d arranged for Riley to visit the next day.

Riley took Prince and her father’s dousing stick with her. The stick was from central Africa. A gift from a local shaman in gratitude. For what, her dad never said. The stick had the typical ‘Y’ shape of its kind. The branch was thick and heavy, painted in bands of bright colors and decorated with intricately knotted leather cords, beads, and a few animal claws and teeth. It did not douse for water. This stick found magic.

Amelia sent her assistant, Kristen Lachlan, to supervise the look-see. The site was locked down and all the workers had been sent home. The security team had been instructed to wait outside the gate.

Kristen sized Riley up with a frank up-and-down gaze as Riley got out of her car, Prince dancing around in circles. He loved going out on cases. Riley was dressed in normal work clothes: slim black cotton leggings, a Gap jean shirt with pearl buttons over an oversized tee shirt, and thick-soled black ankle boots. Her strawberry blond hair was pulled back in a low ponytail. Her old Ray Ban Wayfarers were pushed up to keep her bangs off her forehead.

The other woman was office-perfect: high-waisted slim skirt in a dark Herringbone plaid, starched white blouse, pearl and gold earrings, gold bangle, Cartier watch. Her straight black hair was cut in a business-like bob with the bangs swept to one side.

Corporate Witches had a variety of talents: Elemental, physical, and spiritual. No company admitted to employing witches, of course. However, somebody would know somebody who knew a candidate just right for this firm. Members of the New York Stock Exchange and their kind would never believe how much profit and loss hung on a well-cast spell.

Kristen was keeping her magical aura firmly damped down and Riley couldn't read much beyond 'fellow witch.' Riley knew her aura must be all over the place since she was questing for whatever spooky magic was giving the company grief.

Riley decided not to take offense at this standoffish attitude. Kristen probably activated her sizing-up thing automatically with everyone she met in business.

A ten-foot fence lined with tarp surrounded the entire site and there were floodlights set up at either end. Heavy earthmoving equipment stood idle near stacks of shrink-wrapped lumber and half a dozen big metal containers. Pyramid-shaped piles of gravel stood like sentinel posts at random intervals. Blue-doored port-a-potties were lined up near the gate and opposite a doublewide trailer that served as the office. Or rather *had* served as the office. The trailer was smashed in two even pieces thanks to the crane incident and partially covered in a giant blue tarp. This is where the two men had died.

The ground was dirt with gravel laid down in a grid pattern between what would become the streets. Hundreds of little pine sticks with orange flags and string stretched between them marked future rows of duplexes with small front porches and a strip of garden at the back. Provided they could get them built.

Neither she nor Prince felt anything particularly weird as they made their first walk-through over the property. Prince would have signaled her with a low growl and Riley would feel a tingling in her fingers and toes.

They went back to the car for the Divining Rod.

The stick was not so sanguine regarding weird.

Taking the branches firmly in her hands, she centered her energy and focused on finding dark magic. The dousing stick almost immediately began to shake, practically jerked out of her grip as she approached the worksite.

She followed where the vibrations led and soon stood near a roped off square of concrete in what she guessed was roughly the center of the property. The stick was not happy and quickly jerked her away as if to distance itself from something nasty.

And there was more.

She walked a circle near the fence and the stick indicated multiple areas of energy. How could they have not found this earlier? This place was filthy with dark magic.

Riley peppered Kristen with questions about the site's past and present history. Kristen was prepared, as Riley figured she would be. Amelia was not the sort of witch to suffer fools in her office. Kristen produced a file on the history of the property and showed relevant points to Riley.

It had been a Rancho during the early Californian days, owned by a Spanish family named Cruz. The Cruz family sold it to the Fitzpatrick in the late 1800s. Cattle pasture plowed under for crops. In the 1940s some of the land was transformed into the Fitzpatrick family compound consisting of four large Victorian-style houses with expansive gardens. The family members died off rather alarmingly one after the other over the during the nineties and two thousands. Property taxes went unpaid and the State seized the land a few years before.

“No one was left?” questioned Riley.

Kristen gave an impatient sigh, “Just one crazy woman. They had to have her physically removed several times during the levelling of the existing structures. A squatter they guess. She came screaming out one of the houses when they brought in the machinery. My predecessor pressed charges and we were assured that she would present no more problems.”

“Was or *is* she a witch?” asked Riley.

Kristen shrugged, “She didn’t call down lightning from the sky if that’s what you mean.”

“I think it would be wise if you tracked down what happened to her or give me the info and I can do it. Any other opposition?”

Kristen explained apart from the crazy lady, no one had tried to block the sale. No injunctions or demos or environmental protests. Eventually they’d cleared the old Fitzpatrick homestead as well as the properties to either side.

Kristen walked Riley to the point where the Dousing Stick had begun to react.

“That is one smart stick. The concrete won’t set properly here. Everything seems fine and then the next day it’s a mucky mess. The crew has dug up all around it and come up with zero.”

The dousing stick continued to tremble in her hands.

Prince dug around the edges of the foundation and sniffed, burying his nose in the dirt and gravel. He looked at her and curled his upper lip back from his fangs. If she’d had fangs, she would have bared them too. She didn’t need the stick to feel the dark magic under her feet.

She asked and was given half a blueprint of the property, with the problem foundation clearly marked. While she waited, she took an empty linen bag from her work pouch, filling it with dirt from the site.

Telling Kristen she would come back tomorrow morning with a spell ready and a plan to scry the area she and Prince drove home to Hermosa Beach. The house was small, as were many older homes in the beach communities along this part of the Los Angeles shoreline. This was not Malibu or Laguna.

She'd inherited it mortgage-free, thank God. Despite the goodwill of her parent's old client list, it was hard work making the business (if you could call breaking curses and chasing apparitions a business) financially successful all on her own.

Before going inside, she took off her boots, setting them in an aluminum tray full of sea salt. You never knew what might grab on and try to follow you home. Sea salt was the ultimate purifier.

She also kept a ceramic jar, with a lid, full of salt by the door with a cloth on a little hook behind it. Prince stood at her side, dutifully extending a paw so she could wipe them down with salt. Spirits and other nasties could attach themselves to animals as well.

She wiped off each paw after a quick salting, then sprinkled some of Prince's head and back.

He gave himself a quick shake to scatter it, and anything trying to cling to him, off.

She did the same to herself. Starting at her head then dusting her shoulders, hips and legs.

Once she was satisfied they were supernatural-slime free, she opened the door. It was never locked. Her home was warded, first by her parents and then by Riley. Impenetrable as a bank vault to human and supernatural alike. It wasn't as if the property was invisible. Not exactly. More like, eyes passed over the house. Their brain blurring its outline. Cancelling out the entire structure.

Only blood relatives and a select group of people could cross the wards around the house and garden. All deliveries and mail went to a paid private post box.

Blueprint in hand, walked in. She had a lot of spell work ahead of her and she wanted a beer as she worked. Maybe two.

The house was constructed in an open L-shape, the living room on one end, the dining room, and the kitchen at the other. Windows looking out over the backyard, plus a set facing the front. Stairs to the second floor bisected the entry hall and living room. Two bathrooms upstairs and a half bath on the first floor. There was even a little fireplace on the far side of the living room. The kitchen was small, but comfortable.

Prince squeezed past her, bounding joyously across the living room and into the embrace of the curse who had moved into her house.

Somehow all the warding in the world could not keep out one annoying Russian Count from the afterlife. Or a place very much like it.

Blond, blue-eyed, handsome Count Alexander Ivanovitch of the Imperial Horse Guards and second cousin to the late, great murdered Tsar Nicholas the II of Russia was stretched out on her white Ikea couch watching TV. He looked very comfortable wrapped snuggly in a blue fleece blanket, Prince wriggling on his lap and covering his face with doggy kisses.

Prince liked their new visitor.

Riley, not so much.

The Count had been an unexpected addition — you could hardly call him a perk — attached to a cursed object she'd recently been hired to cleanse: the Romanov Egg. A beautiful jet-black Faberge-like confection adorned in jewels and gold. The object had been through many hands since the revolutionaries stormed the original owner's estate burning the place to the ground and slaughtering everyone they found. Almost prophetically, the object had earned an incendiary reputation over the years. Wherever the egg went, fire followed.

The auction house had opted not to mention the objects fiery past in their glowing catalog description. The current owner had come to Riley after half her Malibu mansion burned to the ground.

The retainer was deliciously large but the Count, who had appeared quite unexpectedly during Riley's summoning spell, quickly made her wonder if the money was worth it.

Ghosts. Can't live with them. Would rather live without them.

He had a bottle of Vodka on the coffee table and what was left of a roast chicken.

Stepping to the coffee table she swiped the platter of chicken away from him.

“God damn it, Alexi!” She refused to call him Count Alexander. “That chicken was for my dinner not yours! And you’re dead. Why do you even eat?”

She stalked into the kitchen to shove the chicken back in the refrigerator.

“I am not,” he called over his shoulder.

“Dead enough!” she shouted back.

The Cursed Egg, as she had learned, held a Portal to another world. One the Count had been trapped in since 1917. If she didn't need that stupid, annoying, *dead* aristocrat to find out who killed her father and kidnapped her mother to a dimension of demons, she would throw the damn Egg in the ocean and him with it.

CHAPTER TWO: PRINCE OF PEEVES

Grabbing two beers, a bag of potato chips (sour cream and onion), a bag of cheddar cheese popcorn (just in case), and the worksite blueprint, she stomped up the stairs to her workroom, shouting, “Don’t touch that chicken!” to the Count for good measure.

“I do as I wish,” he’d shouted back.

“Then wish to feed Prince. And *not* with my chicken,” she said as slammed the door.

It had been six years since Dad’s death and mom’s disappearance. She’d been only nineteen when it happened, and she’d been forced to assume the role of chief investigator for R.I.P. Investigations.

Her workroom was formerly her parents’ master bedroom. There was no way she could ever sleep in there, even though it was much larger than her cramped childhood bedroom.

Instead, she’d transformed it. Cupboards along one wall held neat rows of bottles, powders, liquid, crystals, books, and more. A large, heavy bleached-wooden desk/table she’d found for free online was used mostly for mixing potions. Renovations to the ensuite bathroom created a mini laboratory for alchemical concoctions.

She spread the blueprint out on the long wooden table, anchoring the corners with triangular lead weights she kept for this purpose. Her plan was to create spell-caste pentagrams encased in Vesica Piscis disks to serve as catalysts for a scrying.

Since she needed to look below the surface of the concrete, literally, figuratively, and spiritually, the Vesica Piscis would boost the Pentagrams ability to do just that. The interlocked disks of the Vesica Piscis came with a lot of religious baggage. If she hadn’t been working with witches, she’d have been wary of showing them.

But sacred geometry, Christianity, and all the rest aside, what looked like a simple geometric shape could actually be used as a threshold to reach between realms.

Pentagrams has similar abilities if enchanted correctly. Also, similar prejudices. Religious extremists and the media gave the poor symbol a totally undeserved bad reputation. It was far older than Christianity and had nothing to do with the devil. The five-pointed star represented protection and power as far back as Mesopotamian times. In magic, the Pentagram was useful in anchoring the five elements, the fifth being the top point of the star defined as ‘Spirit’.

Drawing on the elements of earth, air, fire, water, and spirit, would boost her catalysts’ power to enable the Scrying spell to penetrate any magical barriers to what was really going on at the worksite.

Tonight, she’d draw the catalysts and power them up, but wait to trigger the scrying spell at the worksite tomorrow.

Riley drew the first catalyst in the center of the concrete that would not harden. The other four would be placed at each of the four Cardinal directions.

This is what the work-site dirt she'd brought was for. Dirt and a little something extra for the spells.

Blood.

Specifically, Riley's blood.

The magic Riley tapped into and indeed most magic was gray.

Not black.

Not white.

Gray.

Spells of power liked nothing better than blood. Especially that of the spell caster. Blood did not make the casting evil. Unless you were using buckets of it. Or the blood of someone unwilling. Even a drop of such blood turned gray magic to black in an instant.

Magic demanded sacrifice. And the most ritualistic sacrifice was your own blood. Only a drop or two would suffice.

Riley, like most witches she knew, used a little finger-prick unit favored by diabetics to check their blood sugar. She was not into knives or self-harm, thank you very much. Not at all. No way. No how.

She set to work drawing the symbols, following the exact same pattern in each. As she worked, she focused on the benefits this low-cost housing would bring to people if the company could just get it built.

The pentagrams were created with ink, dirt from the work site, a little white glue, and drops of her blood at each point of the pentagram star. Blood and soil would bind the Scrying to her Sight. Her supernatural Sight.

Spells were twisted and shaped depending on the user's intent. Although the magic she was investigating might be dark and dirty, her intent must be the opposite. With magic, it was vital to keep your intention clear with any summoning.

As a Curse Breaker, Riley focused her gifts on helping people hurt or tormented by others. Because unlike most of real life, in magic, you get back what you give out.

Dark magic always came back to bite you in the butt. It might take a while, but payback was coming.

CHATER THREE: FIGHTING DIRTY

Amelia Nordquist, her assistant Kristen, and three burly men were waiting for Riley as she pulled into the construction site. Amelia was tightly encased in a gray wool pencil skirt, black turtleneck, and black lizard-skin power heels. The woman was aggressively slim. Not scary thin. Just LA perfect. Her hair was worn in its natural black, tight curls and haloed the high cheekbones and strong jawline of her handsome face. She wore no jewelry except a watch.

Kristen mirrored her boss today with a gray wrap dress and black pumps with interlocking 'G's' from Gucci.

'Gucci. Nice,' sighed Riley, awkwardly zipping up her Old Navy hoodie. Her fingers were wrapped in elastic bandages following last night's spell work. There had been a lot of finger pricking to get the symbols correctly empowered.

Prince danced on his paws, racing around her in circles. He knew there was spell work today. And hopefully something to bite. Prince enjoyed biting bad things.

A lot.

The group waited for Riley to come to them.

Power games.

Riley dutifully walked to where the women waited. They were her clients. She was working for them, not the other way around.

Amelia was a tall woman, and the heels gave her an even bigger height advantage over Riley. She wasn't intimidated by the Corporate Witch, just jealous of being able to dress in a skirt and heels. When was the last time she'd had on heels?

And oh-my-gosh, her lips were perfect. Was she wearing Dior? Or maybe something from Chanel?

The older woman looked down her straight, perfectly highlighted nose and said, "Ready?"

'Ready to up my cosmetics game!' Riley declared to herself, vowing to stop at a Sephora's soon and maybe at least try on some heels at Off Fifth. There was one in Glendale.

Amelia narrowed her eyes.

Answer. Yes. Nasty magic. Right.

Lip gloss would have to wait until Riley finished this job.

'Focus!' she admonished herself.

Riley patted her backpack and unslung the oversized carrying tube holding the spell caste site plans. “Ready!”

Amelia gave Riley a regal wave to begin and trailed by Kristen, retreated to a pair of deluxe canvas camp chairs. She walked effortlessly in her high heels over the rough gravel. All the Corporate Witches Riley had met were beautiful. Maybe Miss Norquist and the others wreathed themselves in an intimidating *Glamour* magic to boost their appeal. Or maybe they were just born perfect.

Riley was sort of jealous of how gracefully she walked.

Amelia poured herself into a chair.

And sat.

The Corporate Witch decorously crossed her long legs.

Okay, and crossed her legs.

One of the men handed the witch an oversized Starbucks cup. Amelia cocked her head to one side. She looked ready to both judge and enjoy the show.

The large men took their places behind the chairs standing at attention. They guards appeared to be color coded – one African American, one generic white, one Asian – and dressed identically in work jeans and long-sleeve black quarter-zip fleece jackets emblazoned with the company’s corporate logo. They stood silently behind the women, arms crossed over their brawny chests.

Since the entire site had been razed, whatever was affecting the work must therefore be farther underground. This curse was going to call for some serious digging. Hopefully the men were here to help with that. Her skills were many and diverse. Operating a backhoe, though, was not currently one of them.

Taking one of the site plans from the carry- tube, she laid it on the ground, anchoring the corners with stones. It was important the plan touch the earth of the construction site. She was using sympathetic magic, creating a bond between the actual site, the powered-up pentagrams, and this detailed blue print. She pricked one of her unbandaged fingers and let several drops of blood fall to the ground. Then again onto the center and four compass points of the diagram, establishing a connection between her, the site, and the plan. She had a handy little machine meant for diabetics to check their blood that worked fine for the small amounts needed for spells. But it still hurt.

A little furrow of dirt opened at her feet and a line of red on the map appeared simultaneously. She nudged the magic with her will and commanded the blood to move. Both lines fanned out into four channels, both on the paper and the ground. They came to a stop on the north, south, east, and west corners. Riley had been right. The spell or curse encompassed almost the entire site.

The sour scent of brimstone and blood curled up from the ground beneath her. The center of the paper pentagram turned black and with a whoosh of heat, the entire plan spontaneously combusted.

Prince yelped and Riley jumped to her feet as the paper crumbled to ash.

“Yikes. We’re you expecting that?” she asked Prince.

He shook his head.

“No. Me neither.”

She looked at the two women. They and the burly men gazed impassively back. Amelia took a sip of her drink.

Brushing the dirt of her pants, Riley walked to where the witches sat.

“We’ll need to dig. Just as I thought.” Pulling out her phone she brought up a photo of the blueprint she’d had the foresight to take. She pointed to the center spot that had turned black. “Here, first.”

With a word, Amelia mobilized one of the burly men to help Riley. He started up a backhoe and drove it into place. The machine made short if noisy work of the packed dirt and half-dried concrete.

After clearing a hole around three feet deep and twice as wide, he looked at Riley.

“Deeper,” she said.

Prince paced impatiently around them, whining. His long black spines kept popping up and back in agitation. Riley was feeling the same thing. Her hands and fingers tingled with pins and needles. Something was down there.

After the backhoe scooped out a further six feet, Riley heard the bucket scrape stone.

She held up a hand. “Stop.”

Asking the operator to leave the shovel-arm extended, she used it as an impromptu ladder to climb into the hole. Prince jumped in after her, landing lightly on his feet. It was a little cramped with the two of them inside.

Prince growled low in his throat. His hackles rose and the second set of fangs popped out. He pawed at the hole uncovering what appeared at first to be a stone ball about two feet in circumference. The spines snapped erect on his back.

A sensation of cold ran over Riley’s skin making her shiver involuntarily. Instinctively she looked up and gave a panicked yelp. A ring of figures ephemeral and wispy stared down at her.

Prince saw them too. She expected him to jump up and confront them. Instead, his spines partially retracted, and the growling ceased.

As they watched, the figures came into focus. Men and women, their faces contorted in silent screams, arms outstretched as if to push the terror away.

Ghosts.

Gulp.

Riley was no ghost whisperer. Her powers ran to the hidden language of symbols and objects. For which she was very grateful. Ghosts popped up with surprising frequency in curses however, so she was not unduly surprised.

Creeped out?

Definitely.

Just not surprised.

More faces crowded in from behind. Riley climbed part way up the backhoe shovel for a better look. With a gasp, she saw there must be thirty or forty of them.

Had the owners done a Spielberg *Poltergeist* thing and built over a graveyard?

Riley took a deep breath. No. She'd seen the plans and the history of the place. The Fitzpatrick farm that had become a compound of several houses. The houses slowly abandoned. Occupants left without issue. A family graveyard could still exist but that was an awful lot of ghosts for one family. And this was southern California. No big battles or slaughters like the states in the Revolutionary and Civil War. Generally digging turned up nothing scarier than cattle bones.

She glanced over at the Corporate Witches and their henchmen. The backhoe operator had returned to the group. All five stared dispassionately back. Either they couldn't see the ghosts or, more likely, didn't care. The company was paying Riley to deal with this and whatever carnage ensued.

Climbing back down, she knelt, placing her knees on either side of the round boulder. The hum of magic vibrating around it making her head buzz. She placed her hands on top and gave it a turn. After a little grinding resistance, the top moved.

"I'm going to lift it," she said to Prince, who was panting over her shoulder.

He took a firmer stance, digging his claws into the loose earth.

Riley cautiously raised the stone cover.

The stench knocked her backward. Coughing and retching she dropped the heavy lid and it rolled to one side. Prince pawed at his nose, rubbing his face in the dirt. She could smell blood.

Blood and much worse.

"Go to the top," she said coughing hoarsely and motioning with her hand. "Up. Wait with the ghosts."

Prince didn't argue. He leaped, long claws catching in the dirt to climb up and over the edge.

And then she threw up.

A lot.

Pretty much everything until she was left with nothing but the dry heaves.

Prince barked his concern. He peered down, surrounded by the phantoms. They shifted this way and that, agitated.

“I’m okay!” she croaked as she pulled out a handkerchief and tied it over her face. It didn’t help very much.

The bowl was a *Ballaun*, an ancient Irish spell stone that could be used for both blessings and curses. “Backward Blessings” as the Irish glibly dubbed dark hexes. Normally it was not covered but left open. She’d studied them in Ireland. Felt their power. They were from the time of old magic. Black and white designations of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ had little meaning to the ancient ways. Old magic saw the universe in different shades of gray: a little darker, a little lighter, that’s all.

The practice of using Ballaun had persisted well into the Christian era and, obviously, still to this day. Some believed that water collected in them had curative powers and Riley, herself had witnessed that on one occasion. She didn’t doubt their strength in the right – or wrong – hands.

But what the hell was one doing here? *And* filled to the brim with gore? It had been buried for a long time. If the blood hadn’t dried, no wonder the concrete couldn’t set. This was twisted, dirty magic.

The Fitzgeralds had been doing black magic or maybe even necromance via human sacrifice for a very long time. That was the only explanation for the tortured ghosts and the desecration of this land. What goes around, comes around with magic. The Fitzgeralds had used black magic for God knows what purpose. Magic does not forget and in return, their line was eventually wiped out.

The Scrying map had shown her five points of darkness including this one. That made sense. The hex had to cover a wide area. There should be four other basins or some sort of similar magical containers.

Awkwardly shifting around in the narrow space, she unzipped her backpack and removed a liter bottle of water and a gallon zip-lock bag of salt.

She’d known the ground had been defiled from the witches’ description of the building site’s trouble. That meant a purification ritual. It was hard to go wrong with Holy Water and sea salt.

Dropping by St. Anselm’s in Redondo Beach for a quick chat with her family’s friend and ally Father Algren, Riley stocked up on Holy Water. Sea salt, she had already. Bags of it sat in her trunk. ‘Never leave home without it’ had been her dad’s and now her motto.

Holy Water was backed up by a foundation of belief that transformed it into one of the best purifying agents around. No matter if the magic was old or ‘new’. It helped if the witch using it believed in the water’s power. Riley believed. How could anyone who used magic not accept that greater powers existed in the universe? Glorious powers.

Standing, she took out a ring of carved crosses on a delicate chain of ash wood and placed it around the stone basin. That caused the blood inside to bubble. The smell got even worse. If that was possible. She followed with a thick ring of salt.

As she twisted off the bottle top, she glanced up at the ghosts. They were now holding hands. At least, that's what it looked like. A blue light began to pulse. It flowed from them and into the hole surrounding Riley. She checked with Prince. He had a nose for dark energy. He wagged his tail again, indicating he felt no threat from them.

The phantom light glowed more brightly, and she thought she heard a sigh from the phantoms. Speaking clearly, she called on the evil to leave this place, first in Latin then in Irish as she filled the stone basin with Holy Water.

Inside the basin, the mixture bubbled and boiled churning into a horrible pink foam. The foam flowed out of the bowl and onto the ground expanding exponentially like a science experiment gone terribly wrong. In a heartbeat, the foul-smelling mess filled the bottom of the pit. Another beat and it was up to Riley's knees.

With a squeak of fright, she capped the bottle, shoved it in her backpack, and began climbing like a scared monkey up the backhoe arm. Prince jumped over to grab the backpack and tug her onto the surface. Stinking red foam churned and flowed after her.

They burst through the ring of ghosts and put some distance between themselves and whatever was bubbling up. Riley saw the ghosts now had their hands raised over their heads and screaming faces turned up in some horrible semblance of an invocation.

In a thunderous roar, the red foam gushed out of the hole straight into the sky. Riley gaped at it before grabbing Prince's collar and running in the direction of the two witches: both to put some distance between them and the foam and to get a better overall view.

Amelia and Kristen stood up at their approach and waited as the burly men moved their chairs farther away from Riley.

The gusher of red foam split in four different directions, falling in a churning roar and flowing swiftly over the ground. Kristen popped open an oversized umbrella and held it over her boss. The three burly men did the same, protecting themselves from the stinking foam fall out.

As the churning foam reached the four compass points, dirt exploded up and out. Only then Riley reflected perhaps she should have worded the banishing spell slightly differently. It just left *this* place and moved into the four compass points.

Dropping to her knees, she covered her head with her arms, protecting Prince with her body. Stone, gravel, and clumps of earth showered furiously down on them with bruising force.

The Corporate Witches did not offer the use of their umbrellas.

Eventually the barrage slowed and the thunderous pounding died away. Cautiously raising her head, she saw the fountains of bloody foam subside and finally trickle down to a bubbling froth. The ghosts had not moved and continued to ring the center pit.

Bottle of Holy Water in hand, Riley waded through the ankle high muddy red muck to what corresponded to 'North' on the map. Prince trotted ahead of her, head high as he sniffed the air. He bared his teeth and growled again.

"Yep," she said. "I agree with you. Not over yet."

CHAPTER FOUR: GRIT AND BARE IT

The explosion of energy had cleared away the dirt to a depth of maybe four feet exposing another stone basin, just as she'd guessed. Luckily this basin wasn't as deeply buried as the one in the center. The lid lay cracked and broken around the Ballaun. The smell was just as bad as the other and though it was now mostly covered in pink foam, she assumed it was full of blood and offal as well.

Out came the salt and Holy Water. More nasty bubbling and frothing ensued, though nothing as dramatic as the first release. She didn't chant the joining spell yet. The basins must be linked simultaneously to exorcise the entire space.

With Prince at her heels, Riley ran to the western point and repeated her actions with the salt and Holy Water, then south, and finally east.

Jogging back to the car she hauled out two ten-pound bags of salt. Hauling it with her, she carefully traced a circle around the four points leaving a small open space at one end. She then drew lines connecting the four points to the center Ballaun. Running to the open section, she closed it with salt and laid down an amethyst crystal and a large Tiger's Eye bead. They belonged to her and were the personal focus she needed to seal and activate the magic circle. Taking a deep breath, she quieted her inner voice, centered her will, and sealing the salt ring.

She energized the circle with her personal word of power.

A small hum that maybe only she could hear told her the circle was active.

Taking a deep breath, she knelt over the paper holding the Catalyst symbol at the center. It was not necessary to re-enter the pit. Thank you, God!

She laid out another Scrying map on the wet muddy ground, one with the only the center Pentagram. The spontaneous combustion had come as a surprise though it wasn't a disaster. She'd made this one with only the single Catalyst in the center. She'd had a feeling it would be needed and she generally acted on these feelings. As any witch worth her purifying salt would.

She repeated the process with this Catalyst of linking each direction and the center with a drop of her blood. She then sprinkled salt in a circle and the connecting lines on the paper, mimicking what she had done on a larger scale around the worksite.

The hum of sympathetic magic tingled through her fingertips.

From her backpack she pulled a sealed container and a calligraphy brush. Opening the container, she dipped in the brush and began drawing a series of sigils on the corners of the paper. linking each to the next with a thin line. The container held ink she'd mixed with a little of her blood to boost its potency.

She closed her eyes for a moment before speaking the names of the sigils out loud. As she said their name, each appeared in the air above the paper, burning with yellow flame.

With a word, she sent them out to fly into the center pit.

The ground shook and a thunderous roar went up from the muddy hole, echoed in seconds by each of the four compass points.

Red fountains of foul-smelling spray gushed up as the cleansing sigils and dark hexes fought for supremacy, trapped within the magic circle.

The ground rumbled and the dirt began to turn to a semi-liquid state. Skeletons pushed up out of the mud. Some were just dried bones, others had flesh still clinging to them. A few were nauseatingly small.

The Fitzpatrick's had not been nice people.

What sort of dark magic had this coven practiced? Blood and bone fouled their land. Riley felt nausea roll over her as she contemplated their murderous rituals. If she'd had anything left in her stomach, she would have thrown up again.

For agonizingly long moments the ground held the pitiful bodies upright. Then, on some supernatural cue, the dirt fell away. The skeletons collapsed in untidy heaps. Around her, the ring of ghosts disappeared in a shimmer of mist. A tiny glow illuminated the piles of bones as each returned to their own body.

The fountains gradually transformed from dirty red foam to shining beacons of silver light as the cleansing sigils did their job. The ground gave one last seismic groan before the columns of light sank into the ground.

It was silent. The earth still.

“Open the circle,” commanded Amelia, startling Riley.

“I’m not...” Riley gasped, “I’m not sure we should...”

“I wish to inspect the site *now*,” interrupted Amelia in a commanding tone.

Well, damn. Okay.

Riley was breathing heavily; her legs weak and wobbly. Magic needed energy to work. That energy was pulled from the spellcaster.

Maintaining the sympathetic magic and then banishing the dark hex had taken a lot out of Riley. She walked shakily to one edge of the circle and unbound the magic with a word, brushing away a handful of salt.

Riley returned to the pile of dirt near the center pit and the backhoe. She stood quietly, reaching out with her senses. Prince was by her side. Spines extended. Teeth bared. If her spell had completely overpowered the dark hexes, why did she still feel a fearsome tension gripping the earth and air of this place? After all, she'd uncovered the victims and broken the spell in the cursed basins keeping them hidden.

What had she missed?

CHAPTER FIVE: HIDE AND FREAK

A scream ripped the air as a figure erupted up and out of one of the tall piles of rubble a few yards away.

Ah. That would be it.

The figure moved with uncanny speed to tackle Riley. Stinking matted hair and a face, barely human snapped and lunged at her, trying to bite. Magic resonated from the woman pummeling Riley's body with invisible fists that had her seeing stars.

Prince rushed to her defense. He grabbed the woman, at least Riley assumed it was a woman, by the hair and dragged her off, tearing into her clothes, looking for flesh. The woman twisted and turned her fury on the demon dog, going for his throat with her teeth.

The fur around Prince's neck was covered with short spikes, Riley knew she didn't have a chance of getting through that. Even bullets bounced off his spikes. The two of them rolled over and around in the mud. The witch dug her hands into Prince's sides and Riley heard him yelp. His spines were not as tightly packed there.

Riley pulled the silver knives from the sheath sewn into the back of her pants. She had been given these on her fourteenth birthday. Spelled blades that cut through flesh and bone. Any sort of flesh. Any kind of bone.

Running behind Prince, she crouched and sliced at the witch's hands that were gripping his fur. The magically enhanced blades cut though the finger bones as easily as slicing bread. Blood spurted up and out. Some of it landed on Riley's arms. It burned like hot oil.

The witch, because that is what she had to be, screamed louder. She shouted a string of phrases causing the dirt around Riley and Prince to bubble and boil.

Dirt sprang up from the earth for all the world like two arms and grabbed Prince, encasing him in a massive mound of mud. The witch screamed out more words of power.

The mud instantly hardened.

Prince had kept his head clear and began biting chunks of the dirt away with his double set of fangs.

The witch directed the next hex at Riley, completely oblivious to the blood pouring from her severed fingers. Now the dirt bubbled and boiled around Riley. She danced away as it rose and attempted to engulf her like Prince only to be smacked to her knees by a club of gravel from a nearby mound.

Riley swayed back and forth, momentarily stunned. The witch leaped, pinning Riley's arms to her sides with thighs seemingly made of iron. A heavy stone Ballaun lid was held in the palms of her bloody hands. Riley prepared to throw herself to the side, conjuring up a fire hex that burned the inside of her mouth.

Before she could spit it, the witch's forehead blossomed into a red, ragged hole of flesh and bone. Her screaming was choked off into a strangled gurgle. She remained motionless for a moment; hands still held high with the stone lid. A wheezing, whistling sound streamed out of her mouth before the witch began to collapse. Riley pushed her so that she toppled limply to the side. The lid thumped Riley's shoulder hard as it fell from her lifeless grip. The body collapsed releasing a cloud of dust and noxious vapors.

Choking, Riley pushed and wriggling, Riley desperately extricated herself out from under the witch's dead weight. She spat the remaining hex into the ground a few feet away where the flames quickly burned themselves out. Once summoned, magic had to be used.

On her hands and knees, Riley twisted around to see Kristen standing, holding a wide barreled gun with a complex telescopic site on the top. She kept it to her shoulder, one her eye on the scope, waiting to see if another bullet was necessary.

The bloody, cavernous hole in the witch's forehead seemed to indicate *one* of whatever munition the Corporate Witch had used was enough.

They'd put their umbrellas away, Riley noticed.

Amelia gave a little nod. One of the burly men took the gun.

Extricating himself from the mound of mud at last, Prince ran over and began to savage the corpse, starting at the throat.

They would have to cut off her head and burn the body and head separately. That was tradition. And for good reason. There were far too many degrees of 'dead' in the magical world.

Riley was silently hoping that job would not fall to her.

The witch's ashes would then be sealed in an iron box with salt and buried.

"So, I guess that was the crazy lady you had removed from the job site?" Riley asked wiping at the muck on her face with the sleeve of her shirt. Since the shirt was dirty too, all she did was rearrange the mess.

Amelia turned a severe look at Kristen, "She was supposedly contained."

Kristen blanched.

Oops. Someone had screwed up.

"I'll...I'll look into it, Miss Nordquist," stammered Kristen, momentarily losing her corporate cool.

Amelia's expression said she damn well better. And fast.

The tremor of release Riley had been waiting for rolled through the ground. The tension cleared in an audible *whoosh* of air. *Now* it was done. Though there was still a lot of purification work left before the site could be pronounced 'clean.'

Prince finished rubbing his muzzle in the dirt to clean the blood off and trotted over to stand by her side. He'd managed to chew the witch's head off so at least that was one nasty job she could avoid. Not that she couldn't have handled it if magical push came to shove. Curses were deeply sinister things. Dead bodies were nothing new to Riley.

She'd had been forced to do things in the past few years she never would have thought herself capable of in college. That didn't mean she didn't throw up before, after, or during. But she did them.

The Corporate Witches stepped carefully through the dirt and muck.

Amelia gave a satisfied nod in Riley's direction.

Riley was not one to shirk her duty when she was being paid. She indicated the witch's body. "Shall I take her to the crematorium in Calabasas for processing?"

The Thirteen Families had contracts with private crematoriums for quiet disposals.

"No," said Amelia after a few moments of consideration. "I think we will want to keep track of the ashes. Leave it to us."

"And," Riley added, "the skeletons will need to be assembled and then have their bones or ashes spread on consecrated ground."

Amelia looked at Kristen.

"We can handle that," said Kristen. "It will take a lot of digging and our fellows are on contract."

She indicated the burly men.

"Um, can I use your guys now?" Riley asked, her throat hoarse. She felt like she'd inhaled a fistful of dirt in the melee. "We need to dig out the four basins."

They all looked to Amelia who nodded her permission.

It was evening by the time the basins were gathered together. The floodlights illuminated the muddy worksite as they wrapped the Ballaun in several layers of black plastic garbage bags secured with duct tape.

Riley asked Amelia what she wanted her to do next.

"Would you transfer them," she indicated the wrapped Ballaun, "to the Warehouse, please?"

Though she said please, Amelia's authoritative tone of voice left no question it was expected.

Better the stones than the body, Riley thought gratefully. She did not want that *thing* contaminating her car. The stones would be nasty enough but at least they weren't organic. Dead or not, that witch was still buzzing with dirty magic.

Riley covered the front seats with two small ground sheets she kept for just this kind of night while Prince supervised as the men placed the five garbage-bag wrapped stones in the trunk. ‘Supervised’ meaning he growled at the stones and got underfoot as the men worked.

She leaned against the car door and called the Coven warehouse in Lawndale. The facility accepted and guarded objects good, bad, and in between for members of the Thirteen Families. The facility was one of many in this and other countries. They weren’t quite Indiana Jones’ government facility level, but they got the job done.

It was full dark now and Riley shivered a little as the temperature dropped.

“Have any ideas on purifying such a large area?” Amelia asked, spreading out both hands to encompass the construction site.

“I do, actually.”

Riley explained how she’d handled a similar problem in a cursed mineshaft. “You need salt, of course. Saltwater works best over such a large area. I hired a firm to fill several one-ton tanks with sea water then transferred it to the site. I ran pipes and sprinklers into the shaft and pumped the water through the hoses. Worked like a charm.”

Kristen and Amelia exchanged nods.

“Will you contact the tank and pumping companies for us? Give them our contact info and we will handle it from there. We need to coordinate with our construction crews and get this done ASAP. We’ve already lost two weeks.”

“Of course. I’ll make the calls tomorrow morning.”

“Good. Are we done here?”

Riley considered the question. “I believe we are.”

“Kristen will transfer your fee.” She gave Riley a sharp look. “Minus the bullet and my assistant’s time.”

Riley nodded, “Understood.” She was not going to argue. That bullet was much appreciated.

Filthy as they were, she drove directly to the secure warehouse in Lawndale. The basins had been used for dark business for too long and they buzzed angrily behind her making her skin crawl. No way was she taking them onto her property even for one night. She probably couldn’t even get them through the house wards anyway and leaving the car on the street was out of the question. Something nasty would sense the stones and that would be that!

Traffic wasn’t too bad. It was after eight and the worst of the rush had thinned out.

At the massive iron gate topped with steel spikes she keyed in her personal code and waited as it rolled ponderously to the side. There was a second gate, this one covered in razor wire and protective sigils she could feel if not see. The night guard was waiting for her. Several people in full Haz Mat suits

stood by attentively with a motorized trolley. The Haz Mat guys took the stones, stacking them on the trolley as Riley, the guard, and Prince hung back.

She grabbed her backpack as they turned their attention to her car, rolling out three cylinders with hoses attached. First, they sprayed the back with salt from one container followed by a fragrant hot steam from another. Finally, they vacuumed any remaining salt and slapped an amulet on the floor of the trunk and back window.

“You’re good to go,” said the guard tapping the top of her roof and using a remote to open the gates.

She and Prince wearily set off for home. They might not smell good but the car now had a lovely jasmine scent and felt far lighter. No more creepy-crawly fingers on the back of her neck.

CHAPTER SIX: BLOOD COUNT

Riley was aching with fatigue when she finally opened the front door and she and Prince dragged themselves into the living room.

He turned his arctic blue eyes on her and wrinkled his perfectly sculpted nose. “What in the name of all the saints is that smell? Have you been casting spells in a dung heap? Or perhaps rolling in one?”

Stalking over stiff-legged in a good imitation of an angry alley cat, Riley grabbed the bag of popcorn out of his hands, scooped up the bottle of beer, and limped to the stairs.

“I hate you,” she snarled over her shoulder.

“We’re out of vodka,” he called after her. “And why do you never have any caviar in that infernal cold box of yours?”

“The dead,” she moaned with a bitter shake of her head, taking a long pull on the beer. “Can’t live with them, would really like to live without them.”

“I am not dead,” he said in a voice of affronted dignity.

“Dead enough!” she shouted back.

Rummaging under the sink in the upstairs bathroom she found her stash of plastic trash liners. Riley peeled out of her hoodie, shirt, socks, jeans, underwear, and bra and stuffed them inside. No amount of washing was going to make any of those wearable again. She shoved her shoes in a separate bag. Those she could save. Just not tonight.

Together, she and Prince climbed under the shower, hot water on full. Several times as they cleaned up she had to empty the filter she kept over the drain as it got clogged with mud, gravel, and hair. It wasn’t until she’d gone through a half bottle of shampoo and condition – human for her, dog for Prince -- that she noticed the shower water running red. Redder than it should be from her cuts and scrapes.

Riley knelt and immediately looked at Prince’s sides, gently pushing her fingers through the thick fur. He gave a little yelp. There it was. A puncture wound over his ribs. Something was protruding out of it. She hoped it was a piece of wood and not the one of the fingers she sliced off that damn witch.

Lifting him out of the bath, she grabbed an oversized bath towels to wrap him up.

“We have to take care of that, buddy,” she said, smoothing the spines on his head and giving him a kiss.

Still dripping with water and the conditioner only half rinsed out of her hair, she took her phone and speed dialed the South Bay Animal Clinic. The clinic handled... *unusual* pets plus they had a twenty-four-hour hotline.

“Lie down,” she instructed Prince.

Weaving a little from side to side, he didn’t argue.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were hurt, you silly dog,” she scolded before opening the bathroom door and shouting, “Alexi, I need your help. Prince is injured.”

The Count was up the stairs as fast as his long legs could carry him.

“I am here,” was all he said.

She was pulling on her sweats, Riley was not a self-conscious person, especially in an emergency.

“I need to get him to the vet. Can you carry him to the car while I grab my keys and bag?”

“I will.”

He gently lifted Prince and started back the way he had come.

She was soon outside and found both the Count and Prince in the front seat. Prince was held carefully in his arms.

“I will come with you but you must bring the Romanov Egg.”

Alexi could not touch the Egg himself. Something that frustrated him no end. She didn’t argue, running back in the house and scooping the egg into her messenger bag.

Backing out of the driveway she asked, “Can you do this?” They had never gone beyond the Egg’s automatic tether of about three hundred yards.

He shrugged. “We won’t know until we try.”

That was good enough for her.

Burning rubber, she sped up the street, headed for the Vet’s. The clinic was a few miles away, in a strip mall on Hawthorne Boulevard.

Since the Count did not pop out of existence and back into the cursed Egg, Riley concluded he’d been correct. As long as the Egg was near, the Count could move with it.

In fifteen minutes, they had Prince on the examination table at the South Bay Animal Clinic and Hospital. Doctors Alan, Aaron, and Andre Mkombo owned and ran the facility along with a small staff. All three brothers were licensed vets. All of them were also slightly more than human. Exactly what, Riley had so far not been able to tell. Nor did she care.

The clinic was listed in the Coven’s discreet online reference directory and she knew from experience the brothers were highly skilled and remained remarkably calm and gentle no matter what state the animals, creatures, or their owners were in.

Dr. Aaron was on duty tonight. Since the brothers had the same last name, their I.D. tags used their first name. Which was a good thing since they were also identical triplets. He was a big man, as were his brothers. Tall, handsome, his strong, square-chinned face calm and composed. His body language said 'leave this to me, I can handle it.'

Prince whimpered, rolling his eyes. Even demon dogs do not like to go to the Vet.

CHAPTER SEVEN: A STITCH IN TIME

Together, she and the Count petted and comforted her pup but it was not a simple visit. Poor Prince needed an I.V. drip of antibiotics and local anesthetic for some extensive cleaning plus a few follow up shots. The nasty wound did indeed hide one of the witch's fingers.

Riley's stomach lurched at the sight. Good thing her stomach was already empty.

Alexi just raised his eyebrows and turned an inquiring look at her. Dr. Aaron didn't even blink. He'd seen much worse with Prince.

At last Prince was stitched and bandaged. At least he didn't have to suffer the humiliation of a cone of shame. Prince was smart enough to leave his stitches alone.

The doctor then ran a critical eye over Riley. She hadn't even noticed she'd bled through the sleeves of her sweatshirt. His mouth tightened and he shook his head. Dr. Aaron was a man of few words yet very good at expressing his feelings.

Tut, tutting, he called the emergency room at Little Company of Mary and told them he was sending a patient who needed a penicillin shot, a few stitches, and a tetanus booster for good measure.

Alexi carried Prince to the car. Riley thanked the doctor and then, under his stern, dark-eyed gaze, said, "Yes, I will go directly to the ER. I will not pass Go. I will not collect two hundred dollars."

Riley did not like being on examination tables any more than Prince.

Little Company of Mary was her hospital of choice and quite near Hermosa Beach. Several duty nurses and at least as many doctors knew her by name. Which was not a good thing, she reflected as she walked along the antiseptic scented halls a few minutes later.

Poked, prodded, and luckily needing only butterfly stitches, Riley drove them home around midnight.

Alexi settled Prince in an impromptu bed of blankets on the floor of the living room. Riley went to the kitchen and warily opened the refrigerator door. The roast chicken was gone.

"I told you not to eat my chicken," she practically snarled at the Count.

He gave an eloquent shrug. "It is not my fault you are gone and leave me with no food."

"Did I say I hate you."

Smiling brilliantly he answered, "Yes, you did. Several times."

Groaning she turned back to the refrigerator. A ready-to-cook container of white cheddar macaroni and cheese was hidden behind some celery and carrots.

Thank heavens the Count did not yet know how to use the microwave.

The meat drawer held a package of low-fat turkey and ground beef to cook for Prince.

Grabbing a couple of IPAs with her other hand, Riley shut the fridge door with her hip, shoved the container into the microwave and popped the caps off the beers. She set one on the counter by Alexi and spooned the meat mixture into a frying pan, breaking up the chunks of meat.

She then held up her bottle in a casual salute to the Count. "Thank you for helping me with Prince."

"No Vodka?" he asked.

"You had Vodka," she states.

"I drank it."

She gave him such a look that he backed off several steps.

"Beer," he said, "will be adequate."

Picking up the other bottle, he clinked it to hers.

"You are entirely welcome. If you had told me you were going to confront monsters I would have come to help you."

That made her pause.

Would he have helped her?

Could he have?

"I am a soldier," he said in answer to her silent questions. "It has been my business to fight monsters all my life."

Prince limped in from the living room, a little woozy still from the anesthetic.

She knelt by him and gently wrapped her arms around his neck, "Poor guy," she soothed. "You were great tonight puppy, thank you."

Prince made impatient *woofing* noises.

"Yes, food. Understood," she laughed, nuzzling him between his ears. "Almost ready."

"He wants vodka," Alexi said. "He needs Vodka. He is an injured soldier. He should not be made to withsatand such pain without help."

"He's on drugs," Riley said. She turned away from the frying pan to look at Prince's glassy-eyed stare. "Lots of drugs."

Count Alexi gave a snort of disgust. "Inferior stuff. He needs Vodka."

Riley made a face at him. "Let's clarify that. *You* want vodka."

He targeted her with a narrow-eyed sneer probably reserved for peasants on his estate just before he kicked them. "Of course I do. What man does not? Beer is an inferior drink."

She turned and poked him in the chest with the handle of the spatula, "Then don't drink my beer!"

“You gave it to me,” he objected.

She snapped her mouth closed. Right. She had.

“I know ther eis ano half a bottle here someplace.” He began searching through the kitchen cupboards, muttering under his breath in Russian while Riley cooked.

There was, Riley knew. Because she had hid it yesterday.

Just as the meat was done, he reached into the cupboard above the stove, nearly making her tip over the frying pan. Moving aside a couple of casserole dishes, he pulled out the half-full bottle of vodka she’d hidden.

He gave a shout of triumph.

Damn.

He turned his head to her with a crooked smile to his razor-cut lips, “I have found it! I knew you had Vodka. I could sense it.”

“Oh goody,” she hissed sarcastically.

He put the beer aside and poured himself a generous glass as Riley spooned the sizzling meat into Prince’s bowl.

Prince swayed slightly from side to side as he watched her.

Riley fanned the bowl with an oven mitt. “Too hot, pup! Give it a second.”

Taking a contented swallow, Alexi stooped to pour a measure of Vodka in a small bowl by Prince’s water dish. Prince wagged his fluffy black tail though it almost over-balanced him.

“God damn it, Alexi, are you trying to poison my dog! Prince, no. Sit! Bad dog. You’re on drugs” She pushed Alexi away.

Prince stared at her with his big brown eyes, glancing from the Vodka bottle to his bowl and back again.

“No!” she repeated firmly. “No alcohol for dogs. Especially when they’re still high.” She set the meat dish on the floor. “Eat!”

Alexi looked down his nose at her, nostrils slightly flared. “In my Russia, the dogs were always given a measure of vodka in the evening.”

“Honestly, in your Russia, even babies were given vodka in the evening,” she said in exasperation. “That does not make it right.”

“You know nothing of my Russia,” he sniffed, patting Prince on the head as the big dog gobbled up his food.

“That’s because everyone who knew anything about your Russia is dead, your high and mightiness. Killed by the Bolsheviks.”

A look of pain flashed across his face. He turned away trying to hide it, but she had seen. Damn her tongue!

“Alexi, I’m sorry,” Riley said at once.

“It is of no consequence.”

“Honestly. Please.”

With great dignity, he said, “I am going back in my egg.”

Which is rather a difficult thing to say with dignity, Riley thought, but he carried it off.

With a bang that made the glasses shake in the cupboard, the blond man vaporated into a thick column of silver smoke. The glass he was holding dropped to the floor, spilling its contents. With a sly, doggy smile, Prince eagerly lapped it up.

The smoke flowed sinuously around the kitchen and dining room before disappearing into the jeweled egg sitting atop a carved stand on the mantle above the fireplace.

Riley and Prince were alone. If she didn’t need that stupid, annoying, *dead* aristocrat to find out who killed her father and kidnapped her mother to a dimension of demons she would throw the damn egg in the ocean and him with it.

Prince gave her a lopsided doggy smile, hiccupped, and fell over.

“God damn it, Alexi!” she cursed, shaking a fist at the egg.

*Riley, Prince, and Count Alexi’s adventures continue in **Cursed Objects**. Riley and Prince also appear in my Evie Grace, Avenging Angel series in Book 2, **Perilous Grace**, and Book 3, **Deadly Grace**.*

