

*A Sneak Peek
Of the
Dark Caster Series*

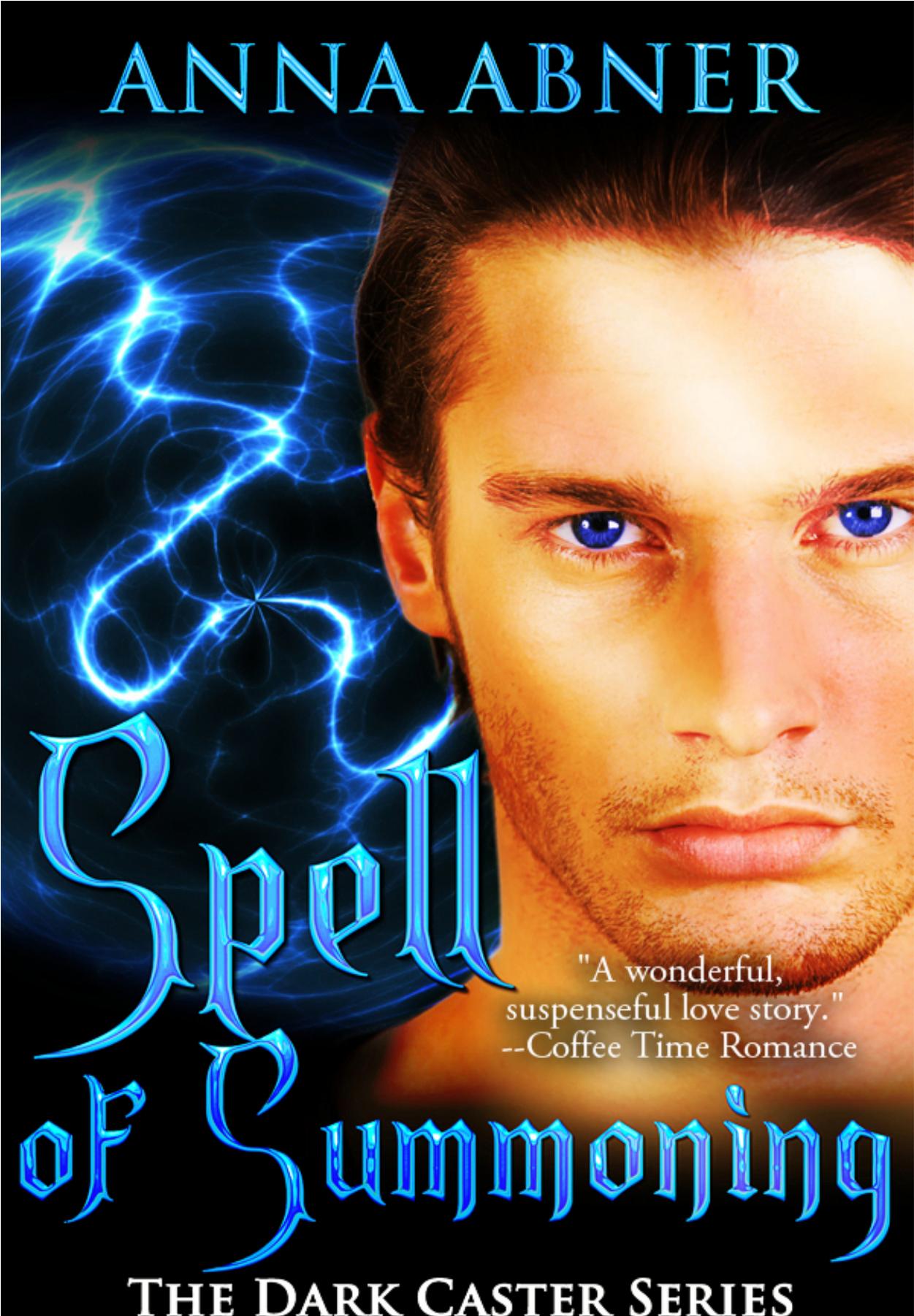
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ANNA ABNER



Spell
of Summoning

"A wonderful,
suspenseful love story."
--Coffee Time Romance

THE DARK CASTER SERIES



Spell of Summoning (Dark Caster #1)
Back Cover Blurb:

Holden Clark walks into Rebecca Powell's life, a tall, blue-eyed stranger who stirs long forgotten desires. But nothing, including this man, is what it seems. A dark necromancer is targeting Becca for a full-blown demonic possession. She is thrust into a world she never knew existed—a world where dark casters create chaos and necromancers talk to the dead.

Holden has no faith in his power. A necromancer, he communicates with the dead, but he has never embraced his gifts. Now, he has no choice. He must stop the dark caster attacking Rebecca, but accepting this mission means he'll be delving into dangerous magics he's never used before.

Under the protection of the damaged and mysterious Holden, Rebecca will question everything ...

Chapter One

April in North Carolina didn't have the sticky heat that would settle over the state during the summer months, but it was warm. Sweat tickled at the back of Holden Clark's neck. But not because of the weather. He'd lied to a woman to get her here.

Well, lie was a strong word. He'd rather say he'd persuaded a woman to join him for lunch under false pretenses. Because he wasn't a liar. In fact, he prided himself on his honesty.

But he couldn't think of any other way to get Rebecca Powell to meet him here. Telling her the truth over the phone was out of the question.

Buster, Holden's yellow Labrador, sat up off the asphalt and whined at an approaching, slow-moving vehicle. This must be her.

A silver Lexus pulled over and parked two spots down in the half-empty lot, giving Holden plenty of room to watch Rebecca Powell through her car windows. Grams was right. No doubt about it, the woman was under a summoning spell, and the demon trying desperately to break into their world clung to Ms. Powell's blonde hair and narrow shoulders like a filthy veil.

"Tell her whatever you have to," Grams said, rounding the hood of his stripped-down 1979 Jeep. "She doesn't have much time."

He leaned against the passenger door, his fingers tightening to the point of pain around Buster's long, braided leash. The air between him and Rebecca crackled with magical energy. The spell on her was no amateurish accident. It was stronger than anything he'd ever experienced. Fear coiled inside him. He couldn't help her. No matter what his Grams said.

With a flip of her hair, Rebecca rose from her car and smiled that big Realtor smile. She looked just like her photo on her website. Pretty, brown-eyed, and about his age, twenty-eight or twenty-nine. She wore her business attire – curled hair, expensive jewelry, short skirt, and heels – like battle armor. It all pronounced her professional, but friendly. Smart, but feminine. A tough southern girl.

Buster's ears perked up. Holden dug in his heels, but Buster was eighty-five pounds of overgrown puppy. He launched himself at Rebecca full force, as if he had springs for feet. The leash jerked out of Holden's hand, and before he could stop him, his dog scratched both her knees, untucked her white blouse, and slammed her against her car. It was Buster's version of a polite "How do you do? Is that a demon over your shoulder?"

"Good Lord," she squealed.

"Buster, no!" Holden wrapped both arms around the dog and lifted him clear off the ground to stop the assault. "Not cool," he grumbled, setting the dog in the Jeep. He secured his leash to the steering wheel, giving him only enough slack to lie down.

"I'm so sorry," Holden said, turning to Miss Powell. "He wouldn't hurt you. He wants to smell—" He almost said *the demon*. "—you."

Rebecca straightened her light blue skirt, one hand on the car for balance, and smiled, the perfect agent even with dog slobber on her arms.

"He sure is friendly."

She closed the distance between them and the air sizzled. She extended her hand for a shake, but her knees wobbled. The magic written all over her must be taking a toll. She listed to the side.

Holden leapt to catch her before she fell, accepting the brunt of her weight against his chest. She was small and light as a bird, and she smelled like fruit and flowers and something even more delicious underneath.

At her touch, a slice of him long frozen roared back to life. It had been so long since he'd felt anything near to desire that he didn't immediately recognize the sensation.

"Excuse me," she chirped, wrestling free. "I got light-headed for a sec. I've been having migraines."

"No problem." Holden brushed himself off, uncomfortable with so much physical contact. It had been months since he'd been this close to a woman. And he'd never been this close to a demon.

"I'm so embarrassed." Rebecca wiped at the worst of the dirt streaks on her skirt.

Blood bubbled up from a scratch above her knee. Holden pulled a mechanic's rag, the closest thing to a Band-Aid in the Jeep, from his glove box and offered it to her. If only he owned a first aid kit like a normal person.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

“No, thanks.” She waved away his rag and handed him a fancy business card with her photo on it. The spell on her crackled, passing him a minor electrical shock. She must have felt it, too, because she snatched her hand back.

“Mr. Clark,” she said, “let’s get down to business. You said you wanted to sell your house, but you had some questions?”

Right. His cover story. He’d called and offered her a job, insisting on meeting her here at this strip mall for a lunch date at a little Mexican restaurant. But he had no intention of selling the farmhouse he’d inherited from his grandparents. The ruse was the simplest way to get her to The Repository, a store that shared the same shopping center.

“Uh. Yeah.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Did you change your mind? Because I’m not feeling very well all of a sudden. I could reschedule.” She produced a cell phone and tapped on it. “To be honest, I’m not taking any new clients right now. My associate, Jessa, though…”

Grams appeared at his elbow. “Don’t even think about it, bubba.”

How did she know he was half a second from accepting the out?

“I can’t,” he mouthed. “It’s worse than I thought.”

Rebecca glanced up. “Sorry?” Her smile faltered.

He’d promised Grams to help Rebecca. He’d actually said the words. But if Rebecca refused his help, it wasn’t his fault.

Might as well come clean. “The spell on you. It’s worse than I thought.”

She cocked her head, a strand of honey-blond hair sliding along her collar. “What did you say?”

Buster whined and strained at his leash, rocking the Jeep.

“The possession spell,” Holden said. “The demon.”

For a moment she didn't react. Then, very calmly, she put away her phone and said, "I understand." She straightened her shoulders and seemed to grow another three inches, though even in her towering heels she remained half a foot shorter than him.

"Good to meet you," she said in a steely tone. "Have a nice day."

Her first instinct was to dismiss anything to do with the supernatural, but he didn't have the luxury of denial. His whole life was one big supernatural tragedy.

Grams adamantly shook her head at him. She'd given him an ultimatum. Stop the demon from breaking through to their world, or she was leaving. For good.

Last try, and then Grams would have to accept he'd done all he could.

Holden grabbed Rebecca by the wrist, stalling her. "Don't you know someone is trying to possess you with a demon?"

* * *

Fear flashed through Rebecca, momentarily obliterating the constant headache and the pain in her thighs from his devil dog. The man whose arms she'd nearly fainted into was another lunatic. The third psychic in the last month. That must be some kind of record.

But Holden didn't look like a Ouija-loving madman. First off, he showed up to a business lunch in jeans and a T-shirt. He was tall. And young, about her age. And way too handsome.

The fear morphed into anger, granting her strength. She locked eyes with his very, very blue ones. Quite distracting eyes, actually.

"Let me go. Now." She stared him down, willing him to release her without any further fuss.

"Hear me out."

"I don't think so." Becca palmed her cell with her free hand, her thumb poised to hit send on a 911 call.

Holden stepped so close she caught his freshly laundered scent, but Rebecca held her ground.

“Have you been seeing things? Having headaches? Does it seem like a haunting, except it’s only around you?”

Did he read minds? Yes, yes, and double yes. She dropped her cell phone into her purse. “My father hired you.”

“No.”

“Then how – ?” Becca blinked and couldn’t stop.

She’d hoped today’s migraine was food poisoning from the Chinese take-out she’d shared with her staff at lunch, but she’d been suffering headaches for weeks. And the other unexplained phenomena surrounding her had nothing to do with MSG or bad bean sprouts.

The pain at the back of her skull receded, but for a minute there – the one during which she’d fallen into this guy’s arms – she’d feared she was having a stroke. Maybe she had.

Holden’s voice lowered. “I can see the summoning spell all over you.”

“You cannot be serious.” Nothing in Becca’s life, not her realty courses or the motivational seminars or the “Double Your Sales” DVDs she’d watched last week, had prepared her for this nonsense.

She forced a smile, wishing she had her sister beside her to roll her eyes for. They would jostle each other and giggle and reinforce the absurdity of all this. Because there were no such things as demons or spells or magic or any of it. That was summer movie, cable TV bullshit that didn’t translate to the real world.

Except she wasn’t so sure anymore. She’d seen *so much*.

Holden frowned, his gaze crisscrossing her face. “Am I wrong?”

“That’s private.” She pointed at her car. “I have a lot of work to do.” That wasn’t true. Not completely. She owned her own office. She made her own schedule.

He looked her right in the eye and leaned in even closer. Way too close. Kissing range close. “A necromancer is targeting you for a full-blown demonic possession. I can help you, if you let me.”

Becca swallowed, overwhelmed with the urge to retreat. His body heat rolled over her like a wave. “What do you —”

“I know what’s happening because I’m a necromancer, too.”

She froze, not sure whether to laugh or get her phone back out and press send on that call. “You’re joking.”

He freed her, leaving her reeling.

“I was trying to —” Holden shook his head. “Forget it. I’ll see what I can do.” He tilted his ear toward his vehicle as if he heard something.

Buster popped his scruffy blond head over the passenger door and rested his chin on the sill, but nothing else about the decades old Jeep drew her attention. And she didn’t hear a thing.

“What are you going to do?” Becca disliked the idea of Holden Clark investigating her personal life behind her back. “What do you mean?”

“There’s a guy in the store over there.”

She glanced at the row of shops. “What guy?”

Holden eased farther away. “I’ll let you know what I find.”

“Whoa,” she said, following him. “You’re not going over there to talk to some guy about my personal business.”

“Then come with me.”

Her logical mind urged her to get as far away from Holden Clark as possible. And fast. She’d taken a self-defense class. Distance and crowds were two important assets. Right now, she had neither.

But what if he wasn't a lunatic? What if he was right?

She was already here, and she had nothing to do the rest of the day but sit in her mostly boxed-up office or go home to her too-small apartment, the second one she'd moved into in the last three months, and eat alone.

Then he went in for the kill, aiming the full strength of those blue eyes on her. "There's a summoning spell on you. I want to get rid of it."

"Not possible."

But Becca couldn't lie to herself. Some too-weird-to-be-believed shit had been going on for a while. It was the reason she lived in a tiny, slightly toxic-smelling one-bedroom apartment instead of her real house on River Road. This wasn't all make-believe. Those chairs hadn't moved themselves.

"Without help it's only going to get worse."

Worse wasn't an option. Worse was stroking out during her morning commute. She couldn't do worse.

"Does this guy have a name?" she asked.

Holden cracked a small, approving smile, and his features softened. She was struck, again, by how handsome he was.

"Cole Burkov. He has experience with dark magic."

"Is he a friend of yours?" she asked.

"Sort of. But the point is he knows a lot about spells."

Becca bit her lip and then went with it because not only was her schedule flexible for the first time in ten years, but if her issues weren't supernatural, then it was CAT scan and blood work time. The very real possibility that she was suffering from a brain tumor was always sitting there

in the back of her mind, terrifying the living daylights out of her. And she'd much rather deal with a pesky spirit than chemotherapy.

"Fine. You got me here. Let's see what he has to say."

Because, yeah, Mr. Clark was probably a head case, but how else to explain the headaches, the nightmares, and the electricity glitches?

She glanced at the fluorescent lamp pole arcing above their heads, but it held steady. No light shows today, then.

Holden secured his dog, and Rebecca pulled an off-white cardigan from her trunk. It would cover the gritty paw marks on her clothes. As she pushed her arms through the long sleeves, she made a promise. Five minutes with Cole Burkov, and then she'd return to her office. That was long enough to decide whether Holden was on to something or a frustrating waste of time.

Of the two other psychics that had tracked Becca down at work, neither had mentioned a necro-whatever or a demonic possession. Their conversations had run more toward blocked chakras, sage smudging, and EMFs. They'd been equally earnest in their conversations and only slightly more ridiculous. And each had brought up forms of payment in nearly the same breath as "Hello, nice to meet you." At least Mr. Clark wasn't asking for money. Yet.

Holden got his dog out of the Jeep, a stronger grip on the leash this time, she hoped, and gestured for her to proceed.

She faced the storefronts. Not exactly voodoo country. Where were the Spanish moss and rolling fog?

"So," she said, "which is the collection of dark and unknowable magics – the fast food Mexican place or the ice cream parlor/arcade?"

He eyed the row of family-friendly establishments. "It's the comic book shop."

The dog surged toward Rebecca, straining at his leash and dancing up on his hind legs. He was obviously biding his time until he could jump all over her. She gave him a look that said, "Try it, and I'll hobble you."

"Who's your fine young gentleman?" Rebecca asked.

"Buster. I hope you don't mind, but he doesn't like being alone."

Mind? "Of course not." She grabbed her bag, locked the car, and marched ahead in her heels and turquoise pencil skirt, her cardigan hiding most of Buster's little gifts.

Holden led the unrepentant Lab across the parking lot, keeping barely enough space between them to prevent further assault. The dog couldn't belong to anyone but Holden. Neither one had a clue about personal space.

"What is a necromancer?" Becca asked, quickly outpaced by Holden's long strides.

He paused on the sidewalk for her to catch up. "I see spirits. Deceased persons."

"You see dead people." She fought a smile. "You're obviously a movie fan. So, is that like a magician?"

"I'm not sure *magician* is the right word."

He settled Buster in a shady spot under the store's front windows and poured water from a bottle into a stainless steel bowl. The little devil tilted its head up and stared at Holden with an expression of pure adoration before belly flopping on the warm concrete. His tail thumped twice, and then he fell asleep.

"You're good with him." It wasn't right to be jealous of a well-cared-for animal. Becca looked after others, but there wasn't a single person who took care of her. Not her sister, not her dad, and her mother didn't count. If she had time for a boyfriend, maybe he would, but she didn't, and there was no point in dwelling on all the reasons why she didn't.

Holden pulled open the shop's glass door and held it for her.

Tall wall-to-wall shelves ringed the interior of the store, which smelled like books and Mexican food. Three men played a dice and card game at a table in the corner, a teenage girl flipped through back issues, and a twenty-something guy stood at the cash register, his nametag pinned to his dark blue polo.

“We have to go,” Becca whispered. “They don’t have magic. They’re *role playing*.”

Holden grunted.

A dark-haired young man wearing a company shirt stared hard at her and then headed right for them. “Freaky. It’s like you have your own personal storm cloud. Demonic possession?”

Holden had probably called this guy on the drive over and prepped him for their little con game if that’s what this was. And there was a good chance that’s what it was.

“Rebecca Powell.” She extended her hand for a quick shake, reflexively passing him her card.

“Sure.” He frowned at Holden. “Let’s talk in the back room.”

“And your name is?” she called after them. No answer.

Damn them. She knocked her knuckles on a glass case dedicated to *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*. The stake-wielding blonde glared up at her from the cover of a glossy graphic novel.

This was a mistake.

Becca checked her watch. Three minutes down. Two to go.

Quiet conversation in the store picked up again. She didn’t mind being the center of attention – her job encouraged it – but this didn’t feel right.

“Hi.” The cashier stepped into her periphery. His nametag read *Justin*.

“Hello.” Smiling sweetly, she handed him her card. “Rebecca Powell. Nice to meet you.”

He traded her a plastic-encased comic book. Leaning in, he whispered, “You’re welcome.” He stared meaningfully at the book and then wandered to the checkout area.

She glanced at the comic in her hands. A group of teenagers under the *Statue of Liberty* raced across the front cover of *Runaways*.

Time's up.

She set the book on a shelf and marched for the closed door marked Private—No Exit. Nobody tried to stop her, and she let herself in. Groups of used candles, posters of big-breasted superheroines, and crates of comic books surrounded Cole and Holden. No ancient tomes or long wands in sight.

Becca crossed the threshold, and her ears buzzed. The air hummed as if she were standing beside an electrified fence.

Cole stopped talking midsentence, and both men stared at her.

The lightning storm in her brain intensified, worse than ever before, and her instincts screamed at her to escape.

The shelf beside her rattled.

Rebecca pasted on a smile, cloaking herself in professionalism. “What have you come up with?”

“Go back into the store,” Holden snapped, a twinge of panic in his voice.

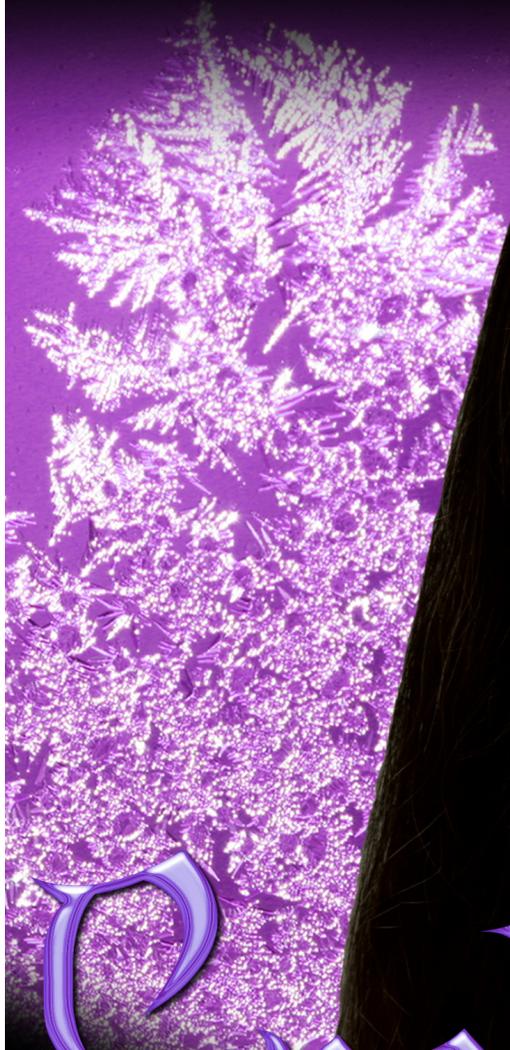
Just what were they doing in here?

She stepped into the room. And the whole building shook.

To be continued...

Click [here](#) to buy the entire novel.

ANNA ABNER



Spell
of Binding

Praise for *Spell of Summoning*:
"A great paranormal adventure
with many twists and turns."
--Community Bookstop

THE DARK CASTER SERIES



Spell of Binding (Dark Caster #2)

Back Cover Blurb:

Daniela Ferraro can't touch people without hurting them. So when she wakes up in the Dark Caster's cell next to the one man guaranteed to mess with her heart, she will risk anything to escape.

David Wilkes has no idea why he's been abducted and thrown in a locked room with Dani, the woman who jilted him two years ago. But when the Dark Caster threatens David's four-year-old son, David will not stop until Ryan is safe and the evil necromancers tormenting him are destroyed.

When Dani's powers are bound and her necromancer friends are out of commission, the only way to protect the people she cares about and keep the Chaos Gate firmly closed is to trust in David.

But the closer Dani gets to David the more lethal her touch becomes for the only man she's ever loved.

Chapter One

David Wilkes's bedroom smelled funny. He woke with a pulsing headache to mold, dust, and perfume scents — three odors he never encountered in his new condo. With great care not to jostle his skull, he peeled his cheek off a strange pillow and rolled onto his back in an unfamiliar bed. A white ceiling came into focus, so he hadn't skydived with a faulty parachute. But something bad had happened. In a flash, it was four years ago, and he was driving his '63 Camaro home with his wife, Jordyn, and their son, Ryan, when a motorcycle veered into his path and the side of a Chinese restaurant rose up in front of his windshield.

"David?"

He returned, gratefully, to the present and an uncertain female voice. But when he lifted his head to make eye contact, the resulting agony forced him to reconsider.

"Are you in pain?"

That was a nurse type of question. Maybe he'd had another accident and ended up in a hospital. Oh, no. *Ryan*. David didn't care if he tore his own body to pieces in a high speed collision, but he couldn't handle the thought of Ryan injured.

"Where's my son?" he mumbled. Even speech hurt.

A small, cold hand palmed his forearm. "Heal," she said. He extracted himself from her icy grasp, and the uncomfortable freezing sensation faded.

David took a deep breath, which helped. A few more and the pain receded into the background.

"I don't know," she answered.

He blinked and found himself staring into a pair of dark, nearly black, eyes. Familiar eyes.

"Daniela?" What was his son's former preschool teacher doing here? And where was *here*?

This was no hospital room, but a basement, considering the dank odors. Two narrow mattresses lay on the floor, a beat-up recliner between them. A bare concrete floor. And a steel door. The kind of door used in horror movies and prison cells.

This was not a hospital. And there was no sign of his son.

"What happened?" he asked. Time felt wonky. Things blended together, some events hazing over. He must have been asleep a long time.

"Drink some water. You'll feel better." She slid a tall plastic bottle across the floor.

Yes, he was thirsty, like really thirsty. David drank, spilling water down the sides of his mouth, and then stood. But he moved too quickly, got light-headed, and reached for Dani to steady himself.

"Something's wrong," he said, and then groaned.

She shrank from his touch. "I'm not totally sure what's going on. I woke up a few minutes ago."

Her rejection cleared his head like nothing else could have. For a moment, he'd forgotten how cold she was. "You're not totally sure." He tried to shake off her obvious revulsion. As if she hadn't already made it clear a year ago. "But you have an idea?"

David remembered leaving his office in city hall. Had he reached Ryan's day care? Had he made it home? Someone had abducted him by force, obviously, and stuck him here with Dani Ferraro, of all people. But that didn't make any sense. He wasn't important enough to abduct. There must be another explanation. Or this was one big goof-up.

"I don't know." She shook her head, and waves of black hair rustled around her narrow shoulders. And just like in the old days, desire zinged through him. She was still graceful and petite and exactly his type. While she had her face turned away, he studied her from her neon pink sneakers to her wild mane of black curls. Yep, still gorgeous. "But it has to do with magic."

He would have laughed if he hadn't been so sick inside. "Right." So, Dani was going the crazy route. Fine. But he couldn't afford to sit around describing pink elephants and shouting about alien conspiracies. He had his son to worry about.

Turning in a slow circle, he stared at the door and then the high window. Where the hell was he, and where was Ryan? The last he remembered, his four-year-old was safe in Auburn in his new day care. But what if...? David's insides twisted, and he rushed the door, jerking on the handle. It didn't budge. Sealed tight. As in triple locked, maybe welded shut.

"Hey!" He pounded on the metal. "Open up!" No response. "You hear me? Open this door!"

His memories twisted and warped. Last night – was it only last night? – he'd been driving home from his office in Auburn's city hall on his way to pick up Ryan at New Horizons Day Care, thinking about dinner and construction on the bridge and the new crime drama waiting for him on his TiVo. There was no reason he should be locked in this room except that someone with a strong incentive had put him here.

And he was trapped with the one woman he'd hoped to never see again. A year had passed, but he hadn't forgotten when this sexy woman had flicked him away like lint on her sleeve.

He had to get out of here. Now.

If Ryan was in some room somewhere, alone and scared and hurt, the boy would be terrified. David hauled back and punched the door. Pain shrieked up his forearm, but there wasn't so much as a scratch on the metal. He couldn't deal with a fracture when he didn't even know where he was or why. No more punching things.

"Ryan!"

Dani didn't get anywhere near him. "Easy, big guy."

Mentally, he shut her out. She was too distracting. There was nothing Dani could say right now he'd want to hear. Unless it was a realistic escape plan. Instead, he pulled himself up onto the high window like it was a chin-up bar and peered through glass streaked in dried mud and covered with a heavy-duty security mesh. Were they still in Auburn, let alone North Carolina? He recognized dirt and light and a part of a dandelion weed. They could have been anywhere in the world.

"Ryan!" David banged on the glass so hard it cracked along the left edge. He dropped to his feet. A cut could mean tetanus or a staph infection and eventually sepsis. He couldn't afford any accidents until he figured all this out.

"There's broken glass," he warned Dani. He couldn't help talking to her just like he couldn't help still liking her even after she'd rejected him. He was such a sucker. "Stay back."

"Did you cut yourself?" Her voice registered concern, but she didn't get any closer in order to look for herself. Obviously, she still couldn't stand him. Not used to feeling like a leper, he turned his back on her.

“No.” Abandoning the window, he inspected the surrounding wall for weaknesses. The bricks looked new, like maybe someone had remodeled the room recently. “We’re prisoners.” It wasn’t a question. They were.

“I haven’t heard anyone else,” Dani said. “My purse is here, but my cell phone is gone.”

He patted his pants pockets. Everything was in his wallet in its proper place, including eighty dollars in cash, but his phone and car keys were missing. “What do they want? Money?” He snorted.

He was the city manager of Auburn. He had a lot of responsibility to the community, and his job came with a fair amount of power, but he couldn’t single-handedly make things happen. He couldn’t clear arrest records. He couldn’t reduce tax fees. He couldn’t even fix tickets.

But if it was a ransom they wanted, no problem. David had savings. And his mother was stupidly wealthy. All they had to do was ask.

“Do they have demands?”

“I haven’t seen anyone besides the two of us,” Dani said.

No demands meant their jailers had no plans to release them. Ever. “Did you see Ryan?”

He glanced up from the junction of the bricks and the concrete floor to watch her reaction, but something hazy and out of place caught his eye. A figure hovered in the corner. David wouldn’t normally pay attention to aberrations in reality. They were lingering symptoms of a serious head injury four years ago. But he was being held hostage in a basement with a girl he’d once kissed, so he was paying attention to everything.

The longer David stared at the figure, the more details solidified. A teenage boy, tall and lanky, appeared. He had dark hair and wore long pants, a thin sweater, and a pair of skate shoes. A manifestation of David’s inner fears? A memory of someone he’d once known? An amalgam of himself, his son, and his late father?

"Did you?" Dani asked for maybe the second or third time.

David blinked, and the boy in the corner vanished. "What?"

"Did you see anyone else?"

"No." He checked the dial on his watch. "It's Friday." His eyes widened. Not possible. He'd been driving home on *Thursday*. He ran his fingers through his hair, feeling for bumps or sore spots, but didn't find any. How had he lost an entire twenty-four hours? "We've been here for a whole day? Are you kidding?" His mother must be freaking out. Not to mention Ryan. The boy wasn't used to David spending nights away from home. He'd be a nervous wreck.

"Actually, it's the nineteenth." She waved her chunky digital watch at him. "We've been here eight days."

"No." The room tilted wildly before righting itself. Eight days. Not only was it physically impossible, but without any word from him, his family would begin to think he was dead. "A person can only live three days without water."

"Unless we were under a sleep spell. Magic can keep a person alive indefinitely."

Magic again. This was serious, damn it. He crossed the room in two long strides and grabbed Dani by the upper arms. His fingers dug into her biceps, and he caught a whiff of floral perfume. His nerve endings came to life as his breath shortened. Even after a year, she still affected him.

"Magic's not real," he said.

She jerked away, much stronger than she appeared, and stumbled into the wall at her back.

"Don't touch me," she said, gasping.

It had been a year since their ill-fated date at Papa Luigi's when he'd leaned in for a good-night kiss and she'd turned to a block of ice. Apparently, her disgust for him hadn't dwindled. Which hurt, even now.

He studied her, unabashed, memorizing every curve and square inch of her work scrubs, and he still couldn't pinpoint the reason for the attraction he felt, even now. She'd always seemed so friendly. A little eccentric, but he liked that. It's why he'd agreed to the setup a year ago. He hadn't expected her to reject him so completely. Not after such an amazing first date, during which they'd clearly connected. Chemistry through the roof. He hadn't imagined that. Her rejection still stung.

Of all the people in the world, what were the two of them doing there together?

"This can't be a coincidence," he said. Maybe Dani knew more than she was saying. Was she in on it? He narrowed his eyes. Was she the mastermind come to screw with him? "What aren't you telling me?"

Dani acted like she hadn't heard his question. "You must have some knowledge of magic, or you wouldn't be here."

"Are you hearing me?"

"Do you hang out with a lot of casters?" she asked.

"Where is Ryan?"

She squinted at different points on his face as if she were solving an algebraic equation.

"Answer me!" God, this was not the time to get weird.

Dani visibly paled. "No way. You're not a caster. You can't be."

* * *

So, so awkward. No, it was worse than that. Humiliating was a good word. So was demeaning. There was no reason for her to be in this room with *him*. She'd once taken a chance on David Wilkes, the first guy in ten years she'd liked enough to try for something more.

The date had been such a train wreck that he wouldn't make eye contact the next time he came by to pick up his son from day care. About a month later, David pulled Ryan out of Dani's

preschool class, and Happy Trails completely, saying he had a new job in Auburn, a forty-five minute drive south. It had been humiliating then, too, to think their date had been so painful he couldn't even stand to look at her afterwards.

Dani folded her arms around her middle, afraid she'd fall to pieces if she let go. Some witch or necromancer had grabbed her and David – what were the odds, really? – and forced them to sleep. Magic, not hers, soured her entire nervous system. Her stomach rioted.

A supernatural being was screwing with her and David, too. And she couldn't even think about anyone hurting four-year-old Ryan because she'd start crying and never stop.

In the ten minutes or so while David had still slept, she'd examined the basement and everything in it. Whoever had put them here was smart. They'd swept the room of anything resembling a weapon. No tools or lumber or anything helpful remained but the narrow mattresses, the recliner, and a couple bottles of flat, room-temperature water. Anything else she needed was going to have to come through that door.

She just hadn't figured out the *why*, yet.

Dani had been born a witch, but she hadn't fully come into her power until the age of fourteen when she'd squeezed in a hall closet with an older boy. That encounter, too, had ended in pain and anguish. She'd spent the last decade trying to control the unrelenting tropical storm brewing inside her with varying levels of success.

The past few years had been fairly stable. She liked working at Happy Trails Day Care. She liked her new apartment. She had a friend. And purpose. Her power was easier to control when she was content.

So putting her in a cage with the one guy who messed with her head was a very bad idea.

What did David Wilkes have to do with anything anyway? Besides being so gorgeous and blond and tall that he made her nervous, if she got upset and touched his bare skin, she could cause permanent damage. She might even kill him.

Her power operated through touch. She couldn't wiggle her nose like Samantha in that show. She couldn't wave a wand like Hermione. Dani had to have actual physical contact with the object – or person – she wanted to effect.

Was that her captor's endgame? Get her to kill an innocent person?

Or maybe David wasn't completely innocent. Maybe he was a caster, too. She stared at him, trying to find signs. No paranormal jewelry. No magical tattoos. Just khaki pants, loafers, and a white button down shirt. Absolutely nothing otherworldly about him. Even his hair was neat and tidy.

"Don't screw around with me," he snapped. "I want to see Ryan. I want to know he's safe."

Someone with significant power had put her and David to sleep like unplugging a pair of blenders. What did David Wilkes have that they wanted? As far as Dani knew, he was a regular guy, a local politician with an adorable son, but nothing screamed supernatural. What was she missing?

"Are you a necromancer? A witch?" Not a single spell mark on him. "Something else?"

David zigzagged across the room from door to recliner to window to mattress like a rat in a maze. Even trapped and freaking out he looked good, which let her know she must be in shock. A normal person in the same situation would be pondering escape, not the power in David Wilkes's long, long legs. Or the way his shoulders flexed and moved under his white shirt. Or how red highlights shone in his touchable blond hair every time he passed in front of the window. He was still hot, and he still revved her engine. Even after their disastrous date and the awkward encounters right afterwards and then the ensuing silence.

He returned to the door and rapped on the steel. "Excuse me! I want to talk to the person in charge."

The idea that this local do-gooder was secretly a caster just didn't click. But if there was a chance that he was a necromancer – even one very, very deep in the magical closet – she had to get him to power up. They needed every advantage they could muster.

And nothing put a caster at ease like seeing someone else use magic.

"I'll do a locator spell, and then you'll know where Ryan is," she offered.

There was no reason to feel silly. Dani cast magic in front of people. Yesterday she'd cast a spell on Rebecca Powell in front of Holden Clark. No, not yesterday. Over a week ago.

But that was different. Holden was a caster, too. And Rebecca had been under a demonic-summoning spell. She'd had a quick and brutal introduction to the supernatural. But David claimed he didn't believe in magic. It was possible he'd never seen a caster at work, let alone a witch.

He stared at her like she'd suggested they polka. "You'll do a what?"

"I'm a witch."

He snorted. "Right."

"Whether you believe me or not doesn't change anything." Kneeling, Dani laid a palm on the cold concrete floor. Her power surged like a blizzard under her skin and connected her nerve endings in a net of magical energy.

The outline of all fifty states appeared in neon-blue lines on the concrete. "Show my location."

A lavender dot burst into being within the borders of North Carolina, her home state. So, their abductor hadn't carried them too far. Good.

"Show Ryan," she said.

Another lavender dot joined the first in nearly the same spot.

"How the hell did you do that?" David asked.

"Magic."

Dani lifted her hand, breaking the spell, and when she next flattened her palm against the floor, a neon-blue map of North Carolina appeared. "Show me where we all are." Three dots popped up in David and Ryan's hometown of Auburn.

Scrutinizing the map, David eased nearer than she was comfortable with. On a normal day, she liked a three-foot bubble of empty space around her at all times. What she called her no-touch zone. David was about eighteen inches away, and this was far from a normal day.

"Is that real?" he asked.

"One hundred percent," she said, trying not to notice little things like the silky caramel color of his trousers or the fine sprinkling of hair on his forearm. It really wasn't fair that he was that good looking and still so out of bounds. "I, uh, I can be more specific."

"Please."

"What's your new address?" She hadn't been to his home since he'd moved away a year ago.

"It's 232 Pear Street. Down at the end of Western."

In increments, Dani drew new maps. Auburn, his neighborhood, and finally a sketch of their home on Pear. Ryan's lavender dot lay in bed.

David leaned in, narrowing the gap to about twelve inches, tops. She stiffened, her breathing accelerating. "Can you see who's with him?"

She magically redrew the blueprint of his condo. "Show me who is in the home with Ryan." One other lavender dot appeared with a little glowing tag that read "Joan Wilkes."

"Your...?"

"My mother," he said.

Thank God. The little boy was safe with his grandma. Whatever plot she and David were part of didn't include Ryan, and that made everything more manageable, even David's extreme proximity.

"Show me where I am." The map's lines adjusted themselves. Her dot paused north of Auburn off Highway 17 on the edge of the old Hofmann Forest.

"We're so close to town," David marveled, hopping over to the window and pulling himself up. "Hey!" His voice boomed in the quiet space. "Can anyone hear me?"

Dani sagged in relief, her no-touch zone blessedly reestablished, and then shook off a cold sensation like frost bite. A symptom of practicing magic. She laid her chilled palm flat against the brick wall beside her. "Show me the spells cast on this room."

Spell marks burst into sight like fireworks around the door and window. Impenetrable, one-way barrier spells.

These were necromancy marks. She couldn't break them. Only another necromancer could do that, and she was fresh out of those. She knew exactly two. Holden Clark was trying to keep a demon out of Rebecca Powell. Maybe he already had. Or maybe he'd failed while Dani slept helplessly in this basement cell.

The other was Cole Burkov, the biggest, baddest caster in town. He'd be a huge help right now. But she couldn't get his attention. He wasn't here, and neither of them was psychic.

"No one will be able to hear you," she confirmed. "They've cast a couple of different spells. Nothing can escape, not even sound, from either the window or the door."

"This is so absurd." Massaging his temples, he frowned at the glowing orange spell marks around the window frame.

Dani plopped onto her bottom and hugged herself for warmth because her temperature had dropped a degree or two during the spell. That was the tricky thing about her magic. It was fueled by her body heat, and it eventually chilled her to the bone.

"Now you know." Her teeth chattered, and she briefly clenched her jaw to stop. "Ryan is with his grandmother."

"Yeah. What a relief." David didn't sound very relieved. "You don't know why we're here?"

"No. Are you ready to tell me why a necromancer put you in this room with a witch?"

"I only understood about half of that sentence, so I guess the answer's no."

"Then why are you here?" Dani asked. It couldn't be to simply pretty up the place. Though he was doing a damn fine job at it.

Hands on hips, he faced the window. "Has it really been a whole week?"

The floor was too cold for her now, so she paced instead, rubbing her forearms to get the blood flowing again. And with that window broken, it would only get colder after nightfall. If they were still there after dark.

"Afraid so."

She was on her own. She'd have to escape without any help. Which meant she was going to have to lay her hands on whoever walked through that door.

"I've never seen anything like this," David grumbled. "I didn't know..." He reached for the marks, but his fingers passed right through them.

"Y-y-yeah." Damned chattering teeth. She sounded like a cartoon character.

His brow furrowed. "Are you okay, or aren't you?"

"I'm fine." And then to distract him from her slight case of hypothermia, Dani added, "What do you remember about the abduction?"

"I'd rather hear how you became a witch."

“That’s easy.” She completed another circuit of the room. Five strides one way, four strides the other. “I was born this way.”

He returned to the door but didn’t knock. Instead, he eyeballed its framing and the narrow seam along the bottom edge.

“Can I try?” she asked.

David stepped out of her way.

Neon spell marks floated around the edges of the door, but maybe her witch magic could overpower the necromancer’s spell. After almost an hour in this place, she was desperate enough to try.

Over the past few years, magic had gotten easier to control. If she wanted to straighten her hair, it fell in black, glossy strands. If she wanted her work scrubs ironed, the wrinkles vanished. If she wanted her fingernails painted purple with white polka dots, presto change-o. She was further in sync with her power every day. It was possible she was more powerful now than she’d ever been. Wouldn’t that be convenient?

Dani pressed the palm of her hand against the cold metal door. “Open.”

An opposing force blasted her flat on her back. Stunned, she lay there for a moment, focusing on drawing breath as foreign power fizzed like soda bubbles under her skin.

So, lesson learned. Witches still couldn’t do jack shit against a necromancer’s spell.

“Jesus. You okay?” David dropped to his knees beside her, smack-dab in her no-touch zone.

No. All this power battling within her was messing with her equilibrium. “Don’t touch me.”

“Right.” His voice echoed in the quiet room. “Message received, Dani.” He gave her a hurt look and put a whole lot of empty space between them.

Dani bit back an explanation. What was the use? She should have a blinking caution light over her head because touching her was hazardous to a person's health. It was easier if he thought she hated him. Better than her mutilating him with magic and being unable to stop.

Dani stood and drifted to the window to stare at dirt and light and a whole lot of nothing. "I finished my shift," she said into the awkward silence. She'd replayed her final conscious hour in her mind a thousand times since waking up in a strange bed. "I walked out with Georgie. I got into my own car and drove away. But after that, nothing. Until now."

"You didn't see anything?" he asked.

"Nope."

"Same here. They must have drugged me. Or hit me. I don't know."

"Or spelled you." That was more likely.

They both heard it at the same time.

He hopped away from the door. "Holy shit."

"Sounds like car tires." Two vehicle doors slammed shut. A couple of minutes later they heard footsteps on stairs.

"Get behind me," David said, rising to his full height.

"No, darlin'." Dani shook her hands to get the blood flowing and then cracked her knuckles as power tingled into her fingertips. "You get behind me."

To be continued...
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ANNA ABNER



Spell
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THE DARK CASTER SERIES



Spell of Vanishing (Dark Caster #3)

Back Cover Blurb:

Cole Burkov is a formidable necromancer, but waking from a devastating nightmare spell has left him confused about what's real and what's fantasy. Afraid of hurting more of his friends, he casts a vanishing spell on himself, except something goes wrong. He's not invisible to spirits. He's invisible to everyone.

Talia Jackson doesn't want to help Cole cast his vanishing spell. She's too busy trying to collect him for the Dark Caster. But when Cole uses her, against her will, to create the spell she becomes the only human being on earth that can see him.

Together, the unlikely allies will seek out one of the most diabolical casters in the dark cabal – the White Wraith. But when the witch fights back, Cole and Talia discover the only way to survive her furious assault is by working together.

Chapter One

Rough asphalt dug into Cole Burkov's knees, but he couldn't remember why he'd knelt in front of a burned down church in the first place. His memory was in tatters, made up of a pinch of nightmare, a dash of reality, and a whole lot of lost time.

Blood was what brought him back to himself. The old, itchy blood on his hands and the fresh, slimy blood smeared across his left forearm, obscuring the line of scars of varying ages running up his wrist like railroad tracks.

When he cast magic he was always careful to cut shallow slices, but maybe sometime during the night, lost in his muddled memories, he'd cut himself too deep.

He couldn't remember.

Cole sucked in a deep breath, hoping the rush of humid, North Carolina air would stimulate his memory, but it only made him dizzy.

Something wasn't right.

As he gazed up at the charred skeleton of a former religious building, he got the funny feeling he was supposed to be doing something. That he wasn't there on his knees by chance.

But the only other living being in the vicinity was a large, ebony crow peering at him from a

willow tree at the edge of the parking lot. Crows were bad luck. One in a churchyard was an omen of death. The bird flapped its wings once and took flight, soaring low over the parking lot before disappearing behind a brick wall.

“Cole!” A familiar ghost appeared in front of him, her face a mask of agony. He’d never seen his spirit companion Stephanie so distressed. “I found Dani. She’s coming. Can you hear me? She’s on her way. Just hang tight and everything will be okay.”

Daniela Ferraro. His friend. The witch.

Bits and pieces of the last few days resurfaced. He’d strangled Dani in a hospital room and then escaped, hiding out on the streets and in the woods ringing the town. The night before he’d slept sheltered among a copse of pine trees behind Auburn’s movie theater. The night before that? Hard to say. He thought the clothes he wore, black scrub bottoms and a yellow smiley face tee, were castoffs from the hospital. Or maybe that was part of the nightmare spell. Maybe he’d never been inside a hospital.

Either way, unable to suffer the guilt a moment longer, he’d come to the Dark Caster’s last known gathering place to face him. Or join him. That, too, was vague.

Of course the bastard wasn’t there.

But if Dani was on her way it meant one of two things. Either he was still in the nightmare spell and Cole would be forced to kill her again when the evil inside him rose up, or he hadn’t killed her and she’d try to stop him from going to war with the Dark Caster.

Neither of those things was going to happen.

“Tell her not to come,” he said. “Tell her not to come anywhere near me.”

* * *

Cole Burkov didn’t look like much of a threat. Talia Jackson had seen homeless people with better personal hygiene.

Black hair made even blacker with days of clinging dirt and grime. Chalky pale skin peeking out of secondhand clothes. Dirty, bare feet.

But she did what she was told, the way she always did, and got out of her car. She straightened a pair of barely-there shorts and a new gray tank top. Even after midnight, late April in North Carolina was muggy, and tendrils of cinnamon curls stuck to the nape of her neck.

She crossed the parking lot, her flip-flops kicking up ash and bits of charred wood from the meetinghouse’s remains. Creepy place. She’d been sent there by one of the Dark Caster’s

messenger spirits, Johanna. Not on his orders, though. No, the White Wraith herself had organized this pick-up. And, to be honest, Talia was much more afraid of the wraith than she was of the DC, the Dark Caster himself. Witches freaked her out.

Of course, Talia had never actually seen or spoken to either the big boss or his right hand woman. It didn't matter. Their reputations were enough to give her nightmares.

Fear of them both was the only reason she stood in the remains of their meetinghouse. To say she was there willingly would've been one heck of an exaggeration. She was there because her nephew was being held by the dark cabal – a sinister group of followers of the Dark Caster – as living, breathing collateral. And Talia was terrified of what would happen to him if she refused.

Burkov hadn't noticed her yet. He had his back to her, studying something on the ground.

According to Johanna, he was a valuable asset. Or a target. It was difficult to guess the cabal's true motives sometimes. All Talia knew was she was supposed to get over there, ASAP, never mind the time, and acquire the scraggly bum with the crazy eyes and bare feet. His spirit companion, an equally nonthreatening soccer mom type, blinked erratically around his periphery like she had a short in her wiring.

Talia really needed this assignment to go smoothly and for Burkov to get in her vehicle without a fight. Because this was one more notch on her Must Impress the DC belt, and one step closer to finding her nephew Sylvester.

"Miss, you must put him to sleep," Hugh whispered at her. Her spirit companion did not trust strange men. Annoyingly old-fashioned, he still fussed when she went out in public unescorted. "Do not give him a chance to speak. He may hurt you before you can protect yourself."

Talia had drawn an emergency spell circle on the roof of her Honda two-door for just such a contingency. She may need it tonight.

The simplest course of action was to put Burkov to sleep – against his will – drag him into the backseat of her car, and then dump him on the Carver's front lawn.

But she didn't do any of those things.

"Cole Burkov?"

He faced her, and only then did she see the dried blood up both arms to the elbows. God, what kind of magic had he been casting? The sight of so much blood triggered a memory. The Carver had warned her Cole was seriously, ridiculously, take-no-chances dangerous.

She slid a step in reverse, her breath freezing in her throat.

"You're not the Dark Caster." He scratched at two days' worth of whiskers. "Are you?" But he didn't go for a weapon. He didn't draw any glyphs.

So, she straightened her shoulders like she would with any big-mouthed freshman. Once a less than impressive fourteen-year-old had sneered at her, "I don't have to listen to you. You're just the school nurse." He'd quickly learned disrespecting her was more trouble than it was worth.

"He sent me to collect you. My name's Talia Jackson. My car's in the lot."

"Don't be an idiot," the spirit in workout clothes shouted at him. "She's a liar. She'll say anything."

"I'm not a liar," Talia grumbled, stung. She'd done terrible things, but she'd never lied.

"Shut your mouth," the ghost snapped. "You don't care about him the way I do. And he's not going anywhere." She turned on Cole. "Listen to me. Just hang on for a little while longer. Your friends are coming."

The threat of his so-called friends made Talia nervous. She wasn't strong enough of a caster to overpower him and his cohorts, too. And if she failed to deliver Cole to the Carver...

The repercussions were too awful to contemplate.

Cole waved the ghost away like swatting a buzzing insect. "Who are you?" he demanded of Talia.

"Talia Jackson," she said again. Nervous, she blew sticky auburn curls from her brow, and then glanced over her shoulder toward her car and the spell circle on its roof. "I'm a member of the dark cabal. I was told you'd be here. And I'm kinda in a hurry."

He stumbled nearer, blood dripping a trail from his fingertips. So near she could tell his eyes were an intense shade of green.

"That's close enough," she warned. Ill or not Talia didn't trust him to play nice. All the other people the DC had introduced her to had been criminally insane. She had nothing to convince her Burkov was any different. "I will protect myself, if I have to."

He produced a bloodstained pocketknife and cracked it open.

Screw it. She reverted to plan B.

Quick as a cat, she scrambled up the windshield of her car. Even though the roof creaked in complaint and dipped beneath her feet, it was worth it to stand surrounded by spell marks. Magical power tingled in her fingertips.

"Miss, I don't like the look of this man," Hugh said softly as he hovered at her side.

Neither did she. "Stop," she shouted at Cole. "We're only doing this my way." But he didn't stop. "Please don't make me do this," she muttered. She didn't want to put him to sleep. She didn't want to hurt people anymore. And without the Carver, his buddy Jeff, and their spirits standing over her goading her on, she faltered.

Cole squinted up at her as if he could read every thought, every criminal act, and every doubt in the contours of her face. "You don't work for the Dark Caster."

"I do." Not by choice, but that was none of his business. "And he is anxious to meet you. If you will please get in the car, I'd really appreciate it." At any moment reinforcements may roll up, incapacitate her, and run off with her target. Seconds ticked by, and she bounced a little in frustration.

"You don't seem like you practice black magic," Cole said, staring hard with those penetrating green eyes of his.

"I'm a casting all-star," she bluffed.

He made a grunting noise. "If you say so."

"Well, I do." She only bent the truth a little. She may not be the best necromancer in the world, but she'd been born one and that made a huge difference.

He caught her eye, and she had the unsettling feeling he was leveling with her. Maybe even trusting her a tiny bit.

"I'm not going to hurt you, as long as you don't cast on me," he said. "Deal?"

She believed him, which was absurd. She didn't even know him. And he had all kinds of reasons to want to hurt her.

"I guess."

When she started to get off the roof of her car, Cole held up a hand to stall her. "I need a favor first."

She didn't want to perform any favors, have any conversations, waste anymore time. But he'd piqued her interest. She couldn't help herself.

"What kind of favor?"

"I need you to help me with a healing spell, and then I'll go with you."

Not a bad compromise. "Okay. Just do it quick. This place gives me the creeps." She may as well have been trampling over fresh graves. Odds were no one had died on the property, but it felt like they had.

He pulled a black marker from his pocket and paired it with the knife.

"Cole Burkov, are you listening to me?" His spirit sounded a bit like an aggravated mother, which amused Talia.

Unperturbed, Cole drew a spell circle, but then he did something Talia had never seen any caster do. He used his very unsanitary looking knife to slice the tender skin of his left forearm, and fresh blood pooled.

"Why did you do that?" she exclaimed. The guy couldn't afford to lose any more blood. In fact, he flattened one hand on the pavement to remain upright.

"I'm fine," he mumbled, though that didn't exactly answer her question.

"Please, Cole!" His spirit broke down and wept with undisguised anguish. The type of grieving wail Talia's mother had made after her eleven-year-old grandson had been abducted.

Just to end the agony, Talia cast an amplification spell at Cole.

Different spells affected her in unique ways, but they all began as a tingle in her extremities, and this was no different. Then, as Hugh fed her more power, an electrical current flowed up from her fingers and toes.

Nothing strange there. Not until Cole channeled both his spirit and Talia's. He soaked up her juju like it was an oil spill and he was made of paper towels. He dragged raw power out of her by the roots, and she winced. It felt like he was tearing the skin off her bones.

She should've known he wouldn't be so greedy with her magic for a simple healing spell.

Rather than mend his cuts and bruises, he rounded on his spirit companion. "Sorry, Steph. I need some time. *Vanesco*," he said.

Talia didn't speak Latin, but no way had Cole cast anything helpful or soothing.

The vibrations of Hugh's power died down. The pulling sensation ceased.

"Cole!" Steph sobbed, seeming to lose sight of him in the dark parking lot. "Goddamn you, Cole!" She sent Talia a final, scathing look, and then disappeared.

Talia, though, had no trouble whatsoever seeing Cole. "You used me," she accused. "I don't appreciate being tricked, Burkov. I should turn your eyes inside out for that. What spell did you use me to cast?"

"A vanishing spell," he admitted.

Oh, that was new. She slipped her cell phone from her back pocket and opened a journaling and sketching app she really liked for studying spells. It gave her the freedom to draw glyphs with

her fingers and add captions with the on-screen keyboard as well as attach photos.

“What was the Latin word you used?” She tapped a quick summary, and then snapped a pic of the glyph on the asphalt.

“I’ll tell you later.” He stood, weaved, and took a knee. “Sorry I couldn’t be upfront with you, but Steph wants to help me, which means stopping me.” He blew out a long breath. “I don’t want to be helped.”

He’d made himself invisible to all spirits, even his own. Tricky, tricky fiend.

On his second attempt, Cole climbed to his feet. “You said something about a car?”

Blood dribbled over his palm and rained upon the ground. But he did nothing to stop it. Like he didn’t care if he bled to death. Like it might be a relief.

“Cover that cut, would you?” Talia put away her phone and hopped off the roof. “Your blood pressure must be in the toilet.”

Without a word, he pulled his T-shirt over his head and wrapped it around his left arm. Talia froze, absorbing the sight of him unexpectedly bare-chested. He was on the thin side, but that only accented the ridges and plains of his torso. His wide chest had a fine covering of dark hair trailing down and disappearing beneath the waistband of his pants.

“This your car?”

“Yeah.” She forced herself to focus. “Get in.”

* * *

“Becca?”

Rebecca Powell rolled to the left, expecting to find a warm body to curl into. But Holden’s side of the bed was empty. The sheets were still warm and smelled of his skin, though, and she burrowed deep under the comforter. Her nagging to-do list attempted to break through her consciousness. So much to finalize. Especially if she and Holden Clark were ever going to open a second Sparky’s diner on the far side of Auburn. But she mentally pushed those thoughts away.

Later.

“Becca, you have to get up.”

She mumbled something to convey that it was still dark out and she’d much rather sleep until at least dawn after the workout he’d given her the night before. Muscles she didn’t even know she possessed ached. But in the very best way.

The bed rocked under his weight, and a gentle hand pulled the silken sheets below her face.

She scrunched her nose. No fair.

“Believe me, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be than in this bed with you, but Dani just called,” he said. “She’s freaking out. She and David got word Cole is at the cabal’s meetinghouse, which is closer to our end of town than hers. He needs help.”

Rebecca sat up, fully awake. “Is he okay?”

“She’s not sure, but she basically ordered me to get my ass over there and pick him up, whether he likes it or not.”

“Of course.” She scurried out of bed and dressed in the clothes she’d tossed onto Holden’s bedroom floor the night before. “Let’s go.”

When she’d been in desperate need of support Cole Burkov had been there for her. He’d woken Holden from a hellish nightmare spell while Becca had been helpless. She would do anything for him.

“Who’s Cole?” asked the snarky female spirit that had been haunting Becca for days. She lurked in the corner between the dresser and the master bath, her head cocked to one side.

Rebecca refused to answer. Her strategy so far had been to ignore the ghost and hope it simply faded away.

Holden, though, worked off of different instincts. “How long are you gonna ignore Jolie?” he asked gently. “She just wants to get to know you.”

She didn’t know how to explain to Holden the feelings churning inside her.

Becca remained silent as she followed him outside and climbed into the passenger seat of his stripped-down Jeep.

Ignoring people was becoming second nature. Luckily, he didn’t seem bothered by it.

“Last I heard Cole had woken from a nightmare spell like yours,” she said as he rolled the vehicle onto the street. “And disappeared. Anything I’m missing?”

“I don’t know.” His mouth compressed into a tight line. “I remember how disorienting it was coming out of that spell. I couldn’t tell what was real. And he was in it for a lot longer than I was.”

“I hope he’s okay,” she said, but Cole’s loitering around the Dark Caster’s meetinghouse said otherwise. What reason could he possibly have to go there?

Turning her palms up, she studied them. She’d accessed her new necromancy powers once. To save Holden from Derek Walker, a top member of the dark cabal. But she hadn’t tapped it since. Honestly, she never wanted to again. If there were a pill to take necromancy away, she would

swallow it. But it wasn't so easy. For the rest of her life she'd be able to cast magic and see spirits of the dead trapped on earth. Whether she liked it, or not.

"We'll make sure he's okay," Holden promised. "I owe the guy."

But when they drove into the parking lot of the burned out building, the whole place was deserted.

"Damn it," Holden swore, hitting the steering wheel. "Dani's gonna kick my butt."

Becca snickered, couldn't help it, imagining the tiny woman fighting a full grown man, but Daniela's power didn't lie in her physical form. She was a witch. And terrifying.

She stifled her laugh.

"Some chick came and picked him up."

Becca jumped at the sound of the young man's voice. She'd never get used to spirits popping up at random times.

Tony, David Wilkes' teenaged spirit companion, appeared beside Holden. Dani and David were spending a lot of time together and sometimes sending a spirit messenger was faster than a phone call.

Tony added, "Dani told David to tell me to tell you —"

"We get it," Holden snapped. "Where is Cole?"

"On the move. Dani's meeting us. I'll navigate." As if he were corporeal and not a hazy image, Tony swung into the back seat and pointed north. "It's up Western."

"This lady," Holden said, "who was she?"

With the wind whipping around the cab of the Jeep, Tony's reply was no more than a whisper in Becca's ear. "I don't know her, but she drove off and no one's seen Cole since."

To be continued...

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ANNA ABNER



Spell
of Shattering

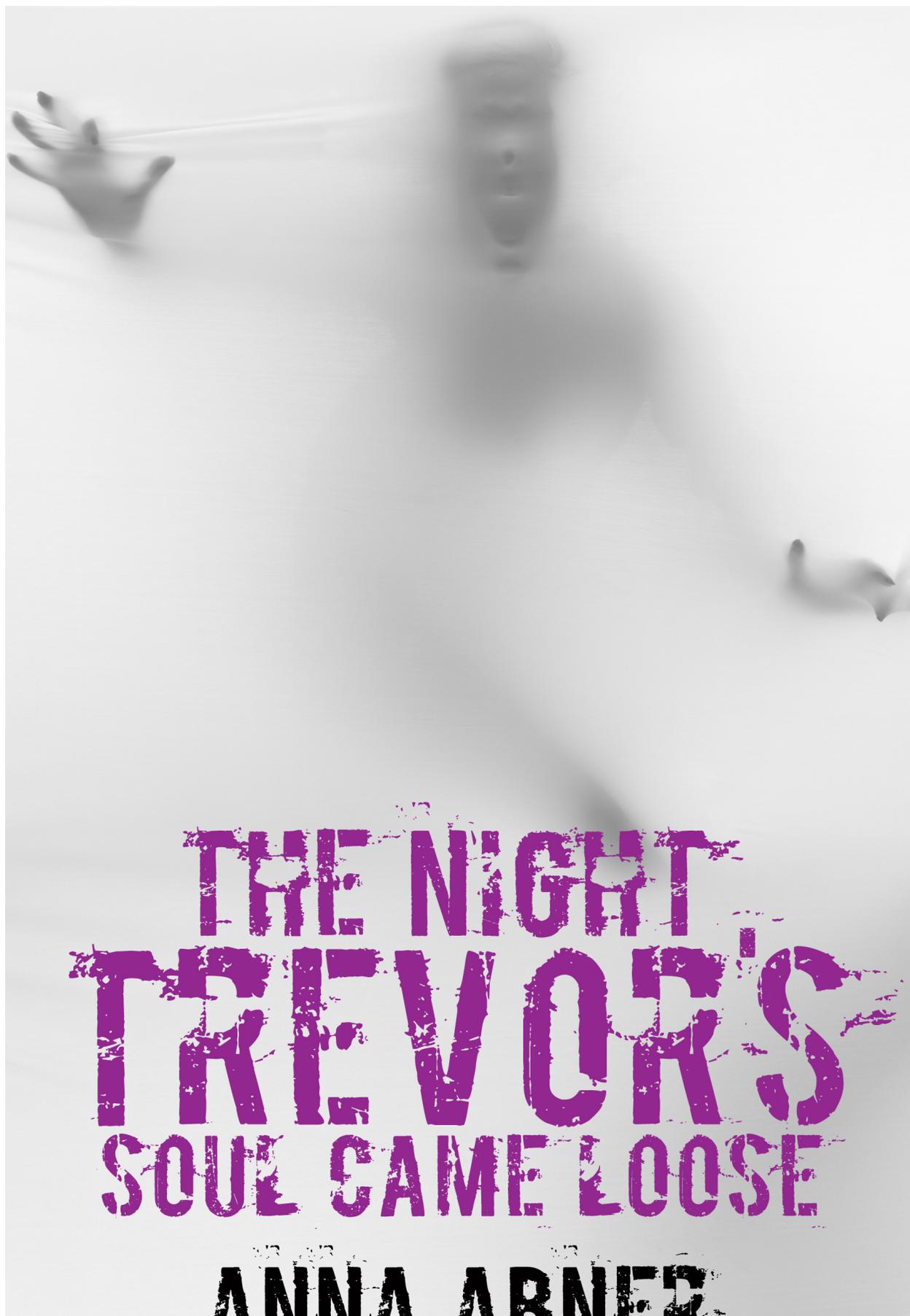
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THE DARK CASTER SERIES



Spell of Shattering (Dark Caster #4)
Back Cover Blurb:

Chapter One



**THE NIGHT
TREVOR'S
SOUL CAME LOOSE**

ANNA ARNER



“The Night Trevor’s Soul Came Loose” (A Short Ghost Story)
Back Cover Blurb:

When a single gunshot shatters Lanie’s life, she comes face to face with the spirit of her beloved.

Except Trevor’s not dead.

I

I shove through the theater exit and a chill sweeps over me. December is cold and dry in Charlotte. I hug my arms around my middle as I wait for Trevor to catch up from holding the door for the couple behind us.

“Are you cold, Lanie?” he asks, falling into step beside me.

Yes. But if I admit I have goose bumps he’ll offer me his jacket or pull me tight to the warmth of his side.

Something has changed in the last few months. It’s not Trevor, either. It’s me.

I’m not so sure the life laid out in front of me is even the life I want to live, and the man I promised to marry is a big part of that original plan.

We’ve been friends since we were six years old and my love has never wavered, not in thirteen years. Until now.

“No. I’m fine.”

Even though my legs aren’t as long as his, our feet find a rhythm and we move in sync.

We head toward downtown and our off campus apartment building. Tonight is our date night. Something we’ve never needed before. But even Trevor must feel things are iffy because this was his idea.

The movie he’d chosen had been a guns blazing revenge thriller. It had opened like any other film of its type. Then the tough guy looking for his missing niece had picked up a love interest and toward the end he’d sarcastically asked her, “What is love, anyway?”

The woman had replied, “Love is life. Love is everything.”

Love is everything.

Except, all of a sudden, my desire to do something different with my life is obscuring my love for my fiancé.

When I'd dreamed of going away to UNC with him, it had included publishing my superhero graphic novel series *Silver Blade* on the side to boost our income and my career. But publishing contracts are hard to come by. So Trevor and I share a cramped one-bedroom apartment overflowing with my unpublished sketchbooks and storyboards.

My parents are sending me through college. I asked them, before I left, to pay for Trevor's education too, but they refused. I hadn't said anything at the time, but it still annoys me. After all, my parents hadn't technically adopted him, but they've been his legal guardians for two years.

I still can't understand why they won't help Trevor. But they don't, and so he works at Lefty's restaurant, and my parents pay our rent.

It'll be different after we graduate. I'll create heart-wrenching graphic novels, and he'll be an electrical engineer, and we won't have to live the way we do now. That is, if we stick to the plan. Tonight I don't know if I want to finish college, let alone move into the suburbs and get married.

We cross the parking lot with two feet of empty air between us. On any other day we'd be holding hands. Without even thinking about it our hands would link, fingers wiggling and twining tight.

But tonight I keep my arms across my ribs.

"I have class at eight in the morning," Trevor says, "but if you want to stop at O'Dowd's for a couple beers..."

"No." I allow my eyes to unfocus until the concrete beneath me is a hazy, gray cloud. "I don't feel very well."

We stroll past a dog park, its trees blotting out any visible stars.

A pang of fear hits my stomach. It's probably not smart to be in this part of town at night. We both know better. There's no moon, no cabs, and no police.

"Come on," Trevor urges, crossing the deserted street.

A stray dog barks, and I nearly jump out of my skin.

This is insane. Never once has Trevor failed to protect me, and I have absolute faith that he won't break his record tonight. Besides, there's nothing to be frightened of. True, it's the witching hour in the big city, but we're just two people walking home, minding our own business.

At the next corner I hear a scuffling sound behind us. We turn at the same time. A grizzled

man with black eyes flashes a gun concealed under his camouflage jacket.

Immediately, Trevor draws me behind him with one arm. Picturing the most violent comics I've devoured in the last two years, I go willingly into his shadow. I don't want to end up a grieving vigilante out for revenge. I just want to go home.

"Cell phones," the guy barks. "Quick." His gaze flickers over the surrounding area, but there are no witnesses and no one to help us.

Trevor tosses his phone with the cracked screen at the guy who catches it easily.

But I don't care about the loss of the phone so long as we get out of this situation fast.

The thief turns on me. "You deaf?"

"I don't have one." I hadn't brought a purse, either. Trevor would never let me pay for anything, anyway. It's easier to leave my stuff at home when we go out together.

He curses at me. "Give me your wallet, then."

I hold up my empty palms.

Like a nightmare come to life, he reaches for me with fingers curled. I smell something fetid and ugly all over him.

This can't be happening.

"What a useless bitch."

Out of nowhere Trevor tackles the guy. "Lanie, run!"

But my legs won't move.

They both knock into me, and I stumble back as they crash to the sidewalk. The gun skitters across the concrete. All three of us go for it at the same time, but the criminal gets it first.

He doesn't hesitate. Not for so much as a second. He jams the muzzle of the gun into Trevor's ribs and fires.

The sound is softer than I expect. Not a bang. More like a *pop*. And then the back of Trevor's shirt explodes and blood splatters the sidewalk.

I watch in horror, frozen to the spot. Trevor lost a fight with that hoodlum? Trevor, the one who never fails to protect me? My champion at all costs?

The guy with the gun is gone before my mind processes what I'm witnessing.

I fall to my knees and roll Trevor onto his back. "Honey? Hang on."

He grabs my hand in a painfully tight grip. My bones and cartilage crunch together. He sees me, though, I can tell he does.

"I'm calling 911." But I don't have a cell phone and Trevor's is long gone. The guy must have pocketed it. Before he pulled the trigger? Or after? I can't remember.

Trevor's breath wheezes out of him, and then nothing.

No. *No*.

This is not how his story is supposed to end. Not on the sidewalk outside a dark consignment shop. He has to finish college. Get a job in the city. Start a family.

This isn't right.

With no phone, I scream. There's no one around that I can see, but I raise my face to the dark sky and wail.

And suddenly, in my mind's eye, I'm not bending over Trevor the wounded man, but Trevor the six-year-old boy. My best friend. And he isn't dead, just faking. When he sees that his ploy has worked, he jumps to his feet and laughs hysterically. He tricked me.

The plastic payphone receiver in the hospital waiting room is cold and sort of sticky against my ear, but my call goes through.

"Mama?" I say when she picks up.

It's so late at night I must have woken her, but I need to hear her voice. Someone else has to know what is going on because I'm not convinced I can handle all this on my own.

"Lanie? Is that you? What's wrong?"

"It's Trevor." I clear my throat to steady my voice. "He was shot." I can't be strong anymore. I cry messily into my free hand, sucking in violent sobbing breaths.

"Where are you?" She sounds awake now. Alert and in charge, like I knew she would be.

But I can't stop crying long enough to answer.

"Lanie?" Mama snaps. "Tell me where you are. I'm getting dressed right now. Daddy and I are coming."

"University Hospital," I squeak. "He died, mama. He died."

"We're coming." Now she's crying, too. "Stay right there. We're on our way."

I hang up the phone and stumble down the hall, but all I can see is the image of Trevor lying motionless on the sidewalk. I watched him die, and then watched paramedics revive him.

And now he rests in a white, starched hospital bed connected to every conceivable tube and wire. Alive, but barely.

I careen past the ICU nursing station into Trevor's room and collapse into the chair next to his bed. His eyelids are about the only part of him I can see. And they're more delicate than I remember. Tiny blue veins stand out in contrast to his chalky skin.

I wish I could hold his hand, but one has a pulse ox clip on it and the other has an IV. Instead I count the beeps of his heart monitor and watch the steady rise and fall of his chest as a machine does his breathing for him.

The last time I talked to his doctor, the man hinted at brain damage. No, more than that. He made me wonder whether Trevor is going to die. For good.

I don't know how to prepare myself for life without Trevor.

A funny sensation prickles the back of my neck. Someone is in the room with us.

I spin, my breath catching in my throat, expecting a doctor or a nurse or even an orderly here to empty the trashcan.

But it's not any of those people.

It's Trevor.

"What?" I blurt out, unable to think of anything more profound to say. If this is some sort of joke, it's extremely unfunny.

I glance at the man in the bed, and then back at the figure in the doorway. I haven't slept all night. And don't people under extreme stress have hallucinations?

"I'm losing my mind," I whisper to the Trevor in the bed before giving his toes a squeeze. Without making eye contact with the phantom, I step around it and head back for the payphone. There are other people I should call. Christopher. Sonya and Paul. They'll all be so worried...

"Lanie?"

I falter a step.

I've known Trevor since he was six years old. I would recognize his voice anywhere — underwater, in a hurricane, on the moon. It's his.

"You're not real," I say without turning around.

I spot the nursing station. Time to test my sanity. "Excuse me," I say to the nearest female, a young woman with way too much foundation on her face. "Do you see the man standing behind me?" I double-check he's still there. He is.

"Who?"

I look again. "Is there a person right there?" I point. "See him?"

Leaning way over the counter, she squints. "Where?"
It's official. I'm hallucinating. "Never mind."

II

I need sleep. A good, long nap will blow the cobwebs out of my mind. My head will clear, the delusions will fade, and I'll form a plan.

I rush downstairs and out onto the street. Because my purse and keys and phone are all at home I head off on foot. It's not that far.

"Lanie?"

His voice.

"Go away," I hiss even though it's always a bad idea to engage imaginary beings.

"Let's get away from this place," he says. "I hate it here."

Trevor has never liked hospitals, not since his mom died in one.

I open my mouth to explain that my purse is at home, but then I snap my jaw closed. If I ignore the hallucination it will fade away.

"What is going on?" he asks, his voice strained. "I can't remember last night. Lanie, did something happen?"

I recall the sight of him in his hospital bed. And then, worst of all, him bleeding on the sidewalk. "You're a figment of my overstressed imagination. I'm not talking to you."

He starts walking backwards in front of me so I have no choice but to look into his big brown eyes. "What happened last night? Something's wrong. I can feel it."

I put my head down and get home.

But at the door of my apartment building I remember I don't have keys and no one is home. I poke my friend Tina's call button.

"Who is it?" her voice crackles over the intercom.

"It's Lanie. I left my keys. Can you buzz me in?"

"Oh my God," Tina shouts. She sounds pissed, not concerned, so I guess she hasn't heard about the shooting. "Where have you been? You said you'd watch Cow-Cow last night so I could go out with Marty, but you never came home and I had to leave him in his crate, and now Gus is mad at me 'cuz a bunch of people complained about the barking!"

The second she takes a breath, I answer into the little speaker box, "I'm sorry, Tina. Just buzz me in."

"Okay. Jeez. You don't have to be a brat about it."

The box beeps, I slip inside the foyer, and press for the elevator to the fifth floor.

The phantom is right beside me. "Why didn't you come home last night?"

Nope. I'm not going to interact with a hallucination.

The stupid elevator won't arrive and I feel trapped in the lobby with an exact replica of Trevor who I miss with a down and dirty aching I can't shake. It's not fair of my brain to play tricks like this because seeing Trevor standing on his own two feet is all I want in the world.

But it's not possible. My fiancé is in the ICU.

Finally the elevator doors open. I step inside, turn around, and come face to face with my delusion.

He has the same hairline scar on his temple.

Trevor got that scar when we were eight. My mother forced me to walk all the way to Trevor's family's farm to give them a tin of cookies she'd made for Christmas. She'd thought it would be cute to doll me up in a poufy red dress.

Trevor had spotted me prancing up his driveway and run over to laugh at my outfit. He'd started throwing snowballs. The tin of cookies fell into the snow. I was so upset that I'd returned fire, and we battled until he got hit with a rock unintentionally concealed in one of my snowballs.

It's the same scar.

I stutter a step toward him, and his expression registers concern.

"Lanie!"

But it's too late. The elevator doors close and the car rises without him.

"He's not real," I repeat several times. If I'm the only person who can see and hear him, he's not real.

In the fifth floor hallway Tina yells at me some more about her dog, but stops short when she gets a good look at me. Blood is still in my clothes and hair and pores.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Trevor got shot," I say in a voice so robotic I don't recognize it. "Do you still have my extra key?"

Finally, after the long walk home and all of Tina's bitching, I close my door to the world and collapse onto my bed, not even bothering to clean up the sketchbooks spread across the comforter, just sprawling on top of them.

I need sleep.

As my eyes drift closed I see Trevor standing over me like a haunted, but noble crime fighter.

My hero.

I dream a scary, black-and-white nightmare straight out of Trevor's past. His mother died of breast cancer when he was twelve. Four years later he had to identify his father's body after the elder Robertson took his life in a single car accident.

He was left with a family farm he had no idea how to run. The foreman who'd worked for the Robertsons for years had called sixteen-year-old Trevor incompetent and immature and a disgrace to the profession.

Trevor lost the farm to the bank.

Even after my parents brought him home to live with us and filed papers to be his legal guardians he still couldn't relax. At night he'd crouch in the corner of the guest bedroom and cry.

I wake from my nap feeling worse than I had when I lay down.

Groaning, I stumble into the bathroom, swallow pain medication for my all-over ache, and shower nice and slow. I don't know how long I've been asleep, but my stomach is growling like it's been hours and hours. I need to check on Trevor and talk to his doctor. Maybe he has better news.

I'm on the edge of the bed tying my shoes when Trevor strolls through the door as if he's made himself at home.

No, not Trevor. My delusion.

Except I'm not sleep-deprived anymore.

"You're still here," I say before thinking better of talking to a phantom.

Apparently, my nap hasn't calmed him any more than it has me. "Lanie, why can't I remember last night?"

I pretend he's not there. Because he isn't. The real Trevor is in the hospital.

"I know something's wrong." His voice wobbles. "You've never frozen me out like this. Not since the first grade."

He sounds so much like Trevor that it pulls me up short. "I can't talk to you," I say. "You're not real. And I'm not crazy."

"*What the hell is going on?*" He swipes his fist over the foyer table where we keep our key rings in a giant clamshell.

"Don't." I flinch away. "You'll break it."

His hand passes right through the solid items. "What. Happened. To. Me."

It's Trevor. I can see it now. Invisible to everyone else, or not, it's him.

"You were shot." The words are sour on my lips, but they tumble out. "They got your heart beating again. Except it's bad. It's really bad. You're not waking up or breathing on your own. You might not make it, Trevor." My breath hitches. "You might die."

His eyes go all shiny like he's going to cry, except I haven't seen him cry since those late night breakdowns two years ago. And then I'd only heard him crying at night. I never actually saw it.

"Are you all right?" he asks, his brown eyes dark with worry. "Did he hurt you?"

"You remember the mugger?"

"It's coming back."

"I'm fine," I assure. "But I don't get why you're standing here talking to me while your body is lying in a hospital bed. Are you..." I look him up and down. Not a detail out of place. "A ghost?"

"No. A ghost is just," he says, "an echo of someone who died." Silently, he pleads with me to believe. "I'm not a ghost; I'm not dead."

"Then what are you?" My imagination is simply not this good. Something else is going on.

"I don't understand any of this. All I know is, you are all I can think about. Wherever you are, I want to be. Period."

Guilt settles heavy in my belly. For the past few months all I can think about is starting fresh somewhere new. On my own.

My phone buzzes with an incoming call and I see that I've missed eight others and four texts. All from my mother's cell.

"Mama?" I answer. "Where are you?"

"Thanks for finally picking up." She sighs into the receiver. "We're at the hospital. We just finished speaking to the doctor. It's not looking good. Trevor's brain was deprived of oxygen for—"

"I understand." I talk right over her, unable to deal with this and the apparition in my living room too. "I'm going to grab dinner. I'll be there to see him soon." I hang up.

But I don't collect my keys or purse. My thoughts are too jumbled. It hurts to think at all. So, I open my laptop with the intent of searching the term *ghost*. Or *out of body experiences*. Or even *spirit familiars*.

But my phone buzzes again and I turn away to read a new text from Mama: "Meet us for dinner at JoJo's across from hospital. Thirty minutes. We need to talk."

"Lanie?" Trevor says in a voice that makes my skin break out in goose bumps. "What is this?"

Oh, crap. I already know what he's looking at. I'd forgotten the last project I'd had open on my laptop. "Hold on, listen —"

"You're leaving me?"

Oh, God, his tone brings to mind heartsick, teenaged Trevor.

"I was just..." I slam the laptop closed.

I'd written a stream of consciousness essay in 3D bubble font to organize my evolving feelings, which probably looked a lot like a Dear John letter. In fuchsia.

It was something Trevor was never supposed to see.

"Lanie?" He visibly struggles. If he gets upset enough will he disappear?

"Since we started college..." Ugh, this is so awful. I'm not ready for this conversation. I haven't sorted my feelings well enough to explain them. "Things are changing. *I'm changing.*"

"You stopped loving me?"

"Of course not." Damn, now I'm crying too. I rub at my face.

"Then why did you write those things?"

At the time I'd been so confused and anxious about the way my life is headed, it had seemed like my relationship with Trevor was holding me back.

Now, with the threat of losing him forever looming over my head, I'm not sure what to think.

"I have to meet my parents," I mumble and escape out the front door.

III

Mama and Daddy are already at JoJo's diner when I walk through the door. Trevor's spirit, or whatever is is, isn't anywhere in sight. And I'm a little freaked out that he's not following me anymore.

After hugs and hellos, we all sit at a booth. Mama and Daddy on one side. Me on the other.

"Do you want to share something?" Mama asks.

I can't even stomach the idea of food. "No. What did you want to talk about?"

She sets the menu aside and holds my dad's hand on the tabletop. "They're still doing tests, but Trevor isn't showing any brain activity," she begins.

I shrink in on myself. Where is he? If I could just see Trevor's image again I wouldn't feel like my ribcage is crumbling.

"We have to accept that Trevor's gone." Mama tears up and Daddy pats her back gently. "The doctors brought his body back, but not his soul. That part of him is gone."

His soul.

"He just needs time," I pledge. His brain will heal. He'll come back to me.

"It won't do any good, pumpkin," Daddy says. "We're going to let him pass peacefully."

"What?" I search both their faces. "What are you talking about?"

"We'll be with him," Mama says. "The doctors will turn off the machines keeping him here. And he'll pass away."

"That's crazy." I push out of the booth because I can't breath all locked up within it. "Trevor's going to wake up."

"No. He's not." Daddy heaves a huge sigh, sinking low into the booth.

Mama gives me a pitying look. "It's for the best."

"Well," I stutter, "I'm his fiancée. And I say no."

"Your Dad and I have the final say on this one," Mama assures.

"He's going to wake up." I collect my purse in shaky hands and leave.

I don't stroll across the street to the hospital. I *run*.

But as I swing into Trevor's room, his bed is missing. My breath dries up in my chest and I have to force myself to inhale.

"He's having an MRI downstairs."

I spin at the voice behind me. It's the nurse with the heavy make-up.

"He's okay, though?"

"The same." She touches my shoulder in a sympathetic way. "Would you like some water while you wait? Or something to read?"

"No." I just want to see Trevor.

She gives my arm a squeeze and leaves me in the shadowy, windowless room. All alone, I take a seat in the chair in the corner and stare at the empty rectangle where Trevor should be.

Reading my brainstorm had hurt him, which was the last thing I wanted to do. He shouldn't have seen it. I'm not ready to talk about my changing feelings, let alone for him to learn about them by accident.

I love him. I've loved him so long I can't remember a time I didn't love him. He was my buddy in grade school and my protector in high school. There wasn't a part of my life he wasn't involved in. Heck, he was the one who encouraged me to draw graphic novels.

But I'm not fifteen anymore. I can think for myself. And I'm not happy with the way things are going with my career and my future.

My parents pay for my tuition at UNC so I can study what I really love. Modern art. They pay for our apartment, too, but only as long as I attend college.

If I quit school Trevor will be homeless. He's having a hard enough time paying his own way through school. If we lose our apartment he'll have to move in with roommates. Or live in the dorms. I'd never see him. Not like now.

I hear quiet voices outside and then two men bring Trevor back on a gurney and settle him among all the machines, reattaching leads and clips.

My gaze follows them out. They pass Trevor standing in the doorway.

"Hi," I whisper, sitting forward. "I was afraid you'd left for good."

"I was following him around." He jerks his chin in the direction of the bed.

I stare at the image of my fiancé. The one that isn't supposed to exist. "I'm glad you're still here."

"I can't believe you want to leave me, Lanie." He drops his head as if he's overcome with exhaustion. "I know you're having issues, but I never thought you'd leave."

"What do you mean issues?" I believed I was doing a good job of keeping my feelings disguised.

"You want to quit school," he says wearily. "But you're scared of disappointing your parents."

And me too I guess.”

“How did you know?” Was he psychic now as well as incorporeal?

“I can read between the lines. Plus, I’ve known you since the first grade. I can tell what you’re thinking.”

“I do want to quit school,” I whisper and it’s a relief to say it out loud.

“What’s holding you back?”

“Hurting you.” It’s the first thing that pops into my mind. “If I drop out my parents will stop supporting me. You’ll be on your own.”

“And you’ll be on your own too. So what?”

“I don’t want to cause you any pain.”

“You’re breaking up with me to save me?” A frustrated groan rumbles through his chest.

“You’re a coward.”

“No, I’m not.” But he has a point. Maybe I am afraid.

“I want to marry you, Lanie,” he says with absolute conviction. “I don’t care how tough the first few years will be while we’re finding our footing. I love you. And I’m not ever going to stop fighting for you.”

“Even if I drop out of college and move to New York and work minimum wage jobs until I sell my superhero series?” I blurt out. “Because that’s what I want to do. I want to stop living off my parents. I hate Charlotte. I hate going to classes that don’t help me find a publisher. I hate waiting around for my life to start!”

He jabs a finger in my direction. “You think I care where I live or what college I go to? I care about you. You’re my whole life, Lanie.”

Love is life. Love is everything.

“Oh.” A doctor walks into the room looking confused over my one-sided shouting match.

“Hello. How are you feeling this evening?”

“Fine,” I say. Just dandy.

He checks the clipboard at the foot of Trevor’s bed. “Do you understand what’s going to happen?”

“What?” I look up as a different nurse joins us.

“I just talked to your parents,” the doctor continues. “They’re on their way. And then you’ll all have time to say good-bye.”

“What?” I glance from the doctor to the phantom in the doorway.

The doctor never loses his friendly, but slightly bored, demeanor. “Your parents spoke to you about the young man's condition, didn't they?”

I nod because I can't vocalize what they told me. It's too awful.

“After all of our tests, he has no significant brain function. I'm afraid there's no chance his condition will improve.”

“No chance,” I repeat because I can't believe it. Trevor has to come back. He's standing right there.

IV

"Lanie, I'm glad you're here." Mama enters the room, followed by Daddy, and the space is suddenly crowded.

The doctor nods at me. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Take your time."

"Oh, my darling boy." My mom bends at the waist and kisses Trevor's forehead. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall--"

"What are you doing?" I say, horrified.

My mom's expression crumbles into grief. "Lanie, say good-bye. He's suffered long enough."

I stand and approach the bed, but I don't touch him. The figure between the sheets is looking less and less like the man I know.

"I don't want to die," Trevor says from behind me. "This sucks. I didn't have enough time with you."

"There will never be enough time," I say sadly.

"I know." Mama reaches to hug me, and I let her give me a squeeze, though it makes my skin shrink two sizes.

"You can't do this," I tell her.

"He's already gone," my dad chimes in. "We have to let his body be at peace."

"No."

They both ignore me.

I have not stood up to my parents very often in my life. Maybe never.

I was always a good girl. I turned in my homework on time. I attend the college they chose. I didn't even make a fuss when they refused to chip in for Trevor's tuition even though they can easily afford it.

But this is the line I cannot toe.

The doctor returns with a nurse and they start pushing buttons on the machines around Trevor's bed.

"We'll disconnect him from the respirator," the doctor narrates calmly, "and he'll stop breathing. It'll be like going to sleep."

"No," I say with more force.

My dad grabs me in a bear hug probably meant to be comforting, but it feels as if he's restraining me. "He's gone."

"No, he's not." I break free and put myself between the bedbound Trevor and the doctor.
 "He's just lost. Temporarily."

Bodies can't survive without their souls. Trevor is dying because his soul has abandoned him.
 If I can convince two halves of the same man to reconnect, Trevor will wake up.

I look straight into his beautiful, tear-filled eyes. "You have to get back into your body. If you don't, they're going to kill you."

"I don't know about this," he answers. "I'm afraid of dying."

"Trevor," I say softly. "You already have."

Mama holds up her hands. "You're upset. We all are."

I ignore her. "Trevor, I don't care what I wrote on my laptop. I was an idiot. I can't lose you."

"If I get into that body," he points to the figure on the bed, "he'll drag me down into death with him."

"They're going to kill you!"

"Lanie!" My mom shakes me by the shoulders. "You're scaring me. Who are you talking to?"

The doctor scans my face like I'm a science experiment. "Do you want something to help you relax?"

"Trevor!" I try to wiggle loose, but Mama's steering me into a chair and she's using her full strength.

And the nurse is fiddling with Trevor's IV as if she's itching to turn him off.

"No!" With a well-placed elbow and a burst of speed I get free and shove the nurse away. "I need more time!"

The nurse looks like she's going to say something mean, but the doctor steps in. "Let's give them a few more minutes. To say good-bye." He sends a pointed look at my mother and then they leave.

"What has gotten into you?" Mama hisses in my face. "You think your theatrics will make any difference? He's brain dead, Lanie! He can't hear you. Nothing you do is going to change that."

"Please," I say to Trevor. "I need you. I can't breathe without you." A raw laugh scrapes up my throat. "And I don't want to."

"I'm scared." He steps closer revealing two wet tracks down his cheeks. "What if this doesn't work?"

Fear flushes through my system, bitter and electric.

"But I'll do it," he says. "I'd do anything for you."

"I love you," I say as the apparition climbs onto the bed. "I love you so much." I haven't said the words nearly enough since we moved to Charlotte. If I get a miracle today I'm saying it a lot more. "I love you, Trevor. I always have. I always will."

He lies down upon the bed and I can no longer tell the difference between the physical Trevor and the ghostly one.

My mom prattles in my ear. Has she been talking the whole time?

"We'll get through this," she says, stroking my hair down my back. "You'll come home and skip a semester. We'll find you a therapist to talk to. Okay? Okay, Lanie?"

The machines around the bed keep beeping in the same rhythm. Trevor doesn't move. Nothing happens, and I make a strangled cry.

This can't be. His soul is back in his body. He has to wake up. Or at the very least start breathing for himself.

"Lanie?" Mam asks. "Okay?"

But I can't tear my eyes from Trevor.

I have been a fool in so many ways. I can't believe, as I take his limp but warm hand in mine, that I ever thought I could live without him. I haven't been away from him for more than a day since we were in grade school, and that's exactly the way I like it.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I took you for granted. If you come back I swear I won't ever make that mistake again."

The respirator machine beeps erratically. Trevor's fingers curl around mine, gently at first, and then tight like metal bands.

"Trevor?" I call, standing on tiptoe to see into his still closed eyes. "Can you hear me?"

He wiggles his toes, and then turns his face in my direction. He hasn't opened his eyes yet, but it's a huge deal.

"Grab the doctor," my mom exclaims. "Something's happening."

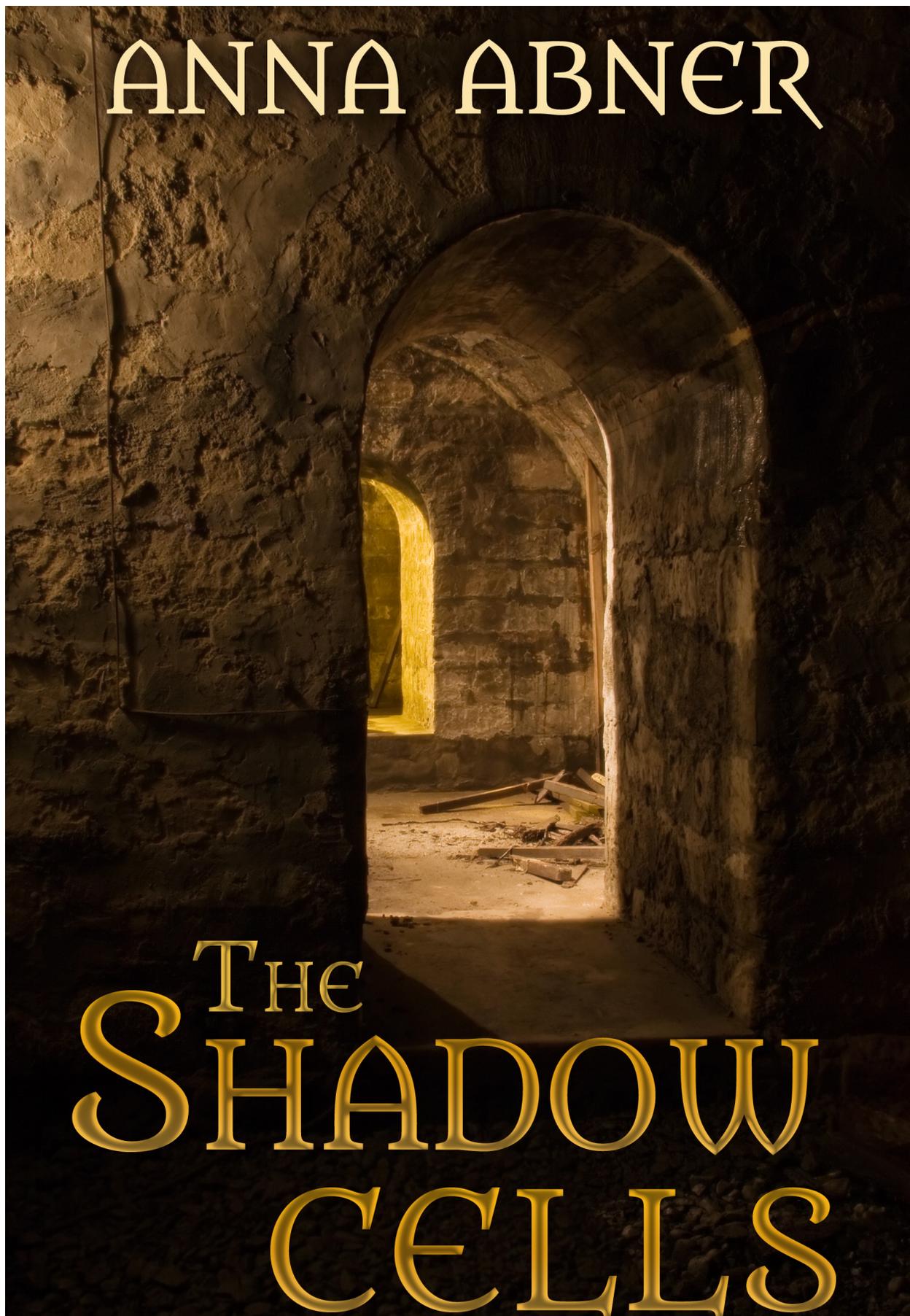
Yeah, something is happening. Trevor is waking up.

THE END

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ANNA ABNER

THE
SHADOW
CELLS





... ..

***“Shadow Cells” (A Brief Witch’s Tale)
Back Cover Blurb:***

Will Meredith and her long lost prince be able to overcome ten years of strife and prejudice to finally be together? Even after he learns she's a witch?

I

“Foolish child.” Prince Tyson Tamb ducked the savage swing of a Brighton farmer’s axe, his mind on his sister and not fully on the battle at hand, which was the only reason the untrained plowman drew blood on his left shoulder. “Silly, impetuous, empty-headed *child*.” Ty pivoted and attacked the other man, his long sword cutting deep into his chest. Writhing, the farmer collapsed, choking on his own blood.

And his little sister Rainey was out there somewhere, as if a battlefield were a playground.

The bloody conflict had dragged on for days between his father’s hired soldiers – who fought bravely for their Red King, Leonid of Tamb – and their neighbors, the witch queen Meredith of Brighton’s farmers. Once allies, they had become fierce foes. Ty’s father had accused the Brightons of stealing Tamb land; the Tambs were suspected of abducting a Brighton family royal. As if the Tamb family wanted anything to do with a cousin of the queen’s.

Ty had planned to stay out of the fight. Until his little sister ran off into the thick of it.

On the field, each army fought like demons for the right to live in peace on their own lands. The Tambs wore red to match their hair. The Brightons looked like thunderclouds advancing, in ebony blouses and whipping black hair.

Rainey wasn’t safe among them.

She was tall for her ten years on earth, flat-chested and long-limbed, but she would never blend in among the countless grubby-faced boys and men battling with swords and clubs. She was too pretty. Her hair too red. Worse, her weapon of choice was a knife with a ten-inch, polished blade given to her by their father, the king. Hardly a weapon at all.

Ty ran over dry, beaten grass and around the scattered bodies of the slain, avoiding swinging

swords and booted heels. Never had he been so ferocious as his long sword slashed through the air. A fist glanced off his shoulder, irritating his wounded side, and he cursed loudly.

And then he spotted her. *Rainey*.

He would know her anywhere, even dressed in boys' clothing and waving her blade like a paintbrush.

But she didn't wave it needlessly.

A Brighton man advanced upon her.

Rainey's costume obviously didn't fool him. Even from a distance Ty recognized rage and lust in the man's expression.

Tyson ran, brittle summer grass crunching under his boots, praying he'd get there before that Brighton jackass laid a finger on his little sister.

But he wasn't fast enough.

The man body-slammed Rainey to the ground, his brutal intentions clear. Ty reached them a moment later and ripped the man off Rainey. His sister was covered in blood. Her victim flopped into the grass, a knife hilt protruding from his chest. He sucked in one, sickening death rattle and was gone.

"Are you hurt?" Ty roared, yanking Rainey to her feet so he could shake some sense into her. He'd been so scared. Bone rattling, blood curdling *scared*.

"No," she said, her teeth chattering. She was afraid, too. Good. Maybe she'd think before she put herself in danger again.

"Halt! Stay where you are!"

Six Brighton guards circled them. Ty whipped Rainey behind him and drew his long sword.

A Brighton woman pushed her way through the ring of larger men.

"Meredith?" The stunned question was barely out of Ty's mouth before the six men plucked his sword away and held him by both arms.

It couldn't be her.

But it was. And the sight of Queen Meredith Brighton's delicate face shrouded in inky black hair did what it always did to him. Flooded his veins with adrenaline.

"Sean," Meredith wailed, dropping to her knees beside the dead Brighton. "You killed my brother." Her wild eyes met Ty's. "You killed Sean."

"Meredith..." He couldn't form coherent sentences.

It had been years since he'd seen her, but she was just as mesmerizing as he remembered. His skin flushed, tingling as her presence brought him fully to life. It was as if the past ten years he'd been asleep, waiting for this moment to rouse to consciousness.

Meredith, however, didn't seem affected in the same way.

"Prince Tyson of Tamb," she said in a grave tone, "you are charged with murder." To her guards, she said, "Bind him."

Rainey screamed.

The queen hardly spared her a look. "And the child as well."

"Meredith, be rational," he shouted. "Rainey isn't involved. I'll go with you. Leave her be."

But she was too engrossed in her brother's body to hear him. One tiny hand brushed a lock of hair from Sean's brow as the other gripped his bloody arm.

"Listen to me," he tried again. "This won't end well for you." To prove it, he wrestled free of her guards' hold and retrieved his sword. He didn't want to kill anyone, but he would to protect Rainey.

Ty's sword swirled and thrust into the crowd as if it were alive and acting of its own will. He sliced one man's arm to the bone, and then turned to skewer a second when the fourth guard, a quick little bugger, struck him in the side of the head with a club.

Sparkling white light exploded into a billion tiny particles, and Ty collapsed onto his hands and knees, shaking blood droplets from his hair like a dog after a swim.

Rainey cried out, her voice a spur in his side.

If he didn't protect his sister, no one would.

Groaning, Ty struggled to get one leg under him when the guard hit him again.

II

Cold stone under his cheek. A thundering ache inside his head. And soft whimpering.

It was the crying that finally woke Ty as he recognized his ten-year-old sister's voice, even in pain and half conscious.

"Rainey?" Both hands were bound tight behind his back, making him clumsy.

"Ty!" She half fell against him. Her hands were bound, too.

He ground his teeth. They didn't have to tie the child. She was no threat to a force of grown men.

"Turn around." He positioned them back-to-back and plucked at the knots on her birdlike wrists. As he did, he studied their gloomy new surroundings – rough, wet walls of a subterranean dungeon marred further with strong, iron bars. On the other side of the cell was an assortment of torture devices, everything from spiked clubs and manacles to a whipping post.

Not the place he wanted his little sister spending time.

The knots were tight, but Rainey's hands were small, and after some untangling, she slipped free.

"Now me," he instructed.

Within minutes they were both loose. The next step was finding a way out of the cell and to his father, who led a unit of soldiers in the North.

The Red King was not a forgiving man. He would raze Meredith's home and holdings to the ground, probably with her in them.

He didn't want to see that happen.

Ty stood on wobbly legs and tested the strength of the floor-to-ceiling iron bars – they were quite sturdy – and Rainey had taken all of the terror with bravery, but she finally reached her ten-year-old limit and flung herself on her big brother's back, wailing into his shirt.

Furious, Ty grabbed her. "That was the most foolish thing you've ever done!" he barked, startling her out of her tears. "You could have been killed. We *both* could have been." She shrank away. "What would Mother and Father have done if you'd died? Did you consider that?"

Rainey shook her head.

"Of course not. You never *think*."

Her blue eyes clouded over, and she dropped her gaze to his mud-caked boots. "I'm sorry."

"Because of your recklessness we're prisoners," he added.

“Prisoners of Meredith Blackheart, the Witch Queen,” she blurted out. “She beds Satan each and every full moon.”

“Nonsense,” Ty said, his anger waning as he remembered Meredith as a beautiful, silken-haired child not much older than Rainey. “I’ll tell you something very important. Love is stronger than any dark arts. And I love you very much, little bug, so you have nothing to fear.”

“I want to go home.”

“Me, too. But first you must swear to me you’ll never admit you killed Sean Brighton.” When she didn’t immediately answer, Ty snapped, “Swear it.”

“I swear. It wasn’t me.”

“Good girl.”

The outer wooden door scraped open, and the queen herself swept into the room, followed by a single guard. She was just as fragile and beautiful as he remembered, and his entire body reacted. Though her dark hair was braided away from her face, he could still see its sheen and heft. He longed to run his fingers through it.

“Meredith,” Ty breathed.

* * *

He spoke so softly Meredith was forced to step closer to hear him. So close there were scant twelve inches between them. His nearness affected her more than she would like to admit. She fantasized – the way she used to when she was a teenager – about what their lives would look like if they’d been married as they were supposed to.

Home.

Love.

Lots of redheaded children pulling at her skirts.

The Tambs were known for their fiery hair. Ty had the most beautiful shade of red. Not orange like his other sister Clara’s. Not faded and streaked with silver like the king’s. No. His was like a golden sunset.

Prince Tyson studied her as boldly as she studied him.

Meredith begrudgingly recognized genuine caring in Tyson Tamb’s pale, blood-spattered face. A sliver of guilt found its way into her heart. Despite being called Satan’s bride, she possessed a sympathetic soul. She glanced at the pitiful red-haired girl covered in blood and tears.

“Is she injured?” she asked. “Does she need a healer?”

“She is untouched,” Ty answered.

The filthy, bruised child reminded Meredith of all she was on the verge of losing if the war didn't end soon. Her throne. Her people. Probably even her life.

Once word had spread that Meredith Brighton held two of the Red King's children, Tamb soldiers fought with renewed fury. Meredith's army was days – if she were lucky – from utter destruction. The whole of the Tamb army was camped outside the walls of her keep doing their best to smash their way inside. Soon, they would break down the walls and find her and probably destroy her as well as her home.

Meredith was more scared than she'd ever been, even more frightened than when King Leonid declared her a witch and broke her engagement to his son and heir. Her people needed her to be their leader, but she was days from seeing her kingdom overthrown. Tyson and Rainey Tamb were the closest Meredith could get to their father.

She winced at the dark skin under Ty's eyes and the hollow places along his cheeks. Meredith tried very hard to keep up her icy exterior because the sight of Prince Tyson after so many years, beaten and suffering, was doing strange things to her resolve.

But it was time to focus on reality. This man, this massive warrior, had murdered her only brother. "Ty," she began, "I saw you standing over Sean's –"

Ty's hand shot out from between the bars so fast his fingers were a blur, and then he clamped onto the back of Meredith's neck and yanked her flush against the cell. Before she could scream, he covered her mouth, and Ty's breath was hot against her face.

She fought with all her strength, though it did no good. As her fear ratcheted higher, her skin came alive with perilous energy. The harder she struggled, the more dangerous their position became. For him.

"Meredith, what are you playing at? You knew my father's temper," Ty hissed directly into her ear. "Release us, or I will not be able to save you."

"You bastard," her guard roared, rushing the cell.

"Stay back," Ty warned. "This is between her and I." Facing her, he said, "Meredith, my father will kill you and anyone else in his way." His grip eased. "You're not black-hearted. I don't believe that."

She ceased struggling.

So, Ty had heard the cruel nickname her enemies called her behind her back. *Meredith Blackheart. Queen of Hell.*

Shame and anger overwhelmed all other senses.

"I don't want to hurt you," he continued gently, oblivious to her rage. "I never did." He released her, and Meredith stumbled out of reach to massage her bruised throat.

Her guard brushed past her and slammed into the bars, stretching to reach Ty, but the prince was too fast. When the guard fumbled for his keys, Meredith shouted, "Leave us."

He looked on the verge of arguing, but finally he exited the room.

"You're a good person," Ty told her. "Don't do this."

"Silence," she snapped, as if they'd never known each other, never played as children, never been friends. More than friends. "Perhaps the king should fear *me*."

"Meredith?" He stared at her as if he didn't recognize her.

"You will address me as *Your Highness*," she answered coldly. "And you will answer my questions honestly."

"Of course, I will," he said. "We've always been honest with each other, haven't we?"

When she'd attacked the Red King's army, she knew it would start a war and enflame their unnamed, longstanding conflict.

But she'd been angry and scared and feeling outside pressure to *do something*. Because the king was encroaching upon her lands and now her cousin, a silly-headed girl who'd never caused trouble for anyone, was missing. If Meredith didn't fight back the king would overthrow her and steal her kingdom for himself.

"What do you want to know?" Ty asked.

Staring into the dark blue of his eyes, shadowed with bruises, she could almost forget why they were no longer friends. Her face and throat throbbed at the memory of his touch. But not in pain. No, in intense awareness.

"Where is my cousin, Lady Beatrice?"

"I don't know." His answer was quick, automatic. Suspicious.

"What does your father want with my cousin? She has no power and no value to him." She pressed, "Was it your idea to murder Sean. Or your father's?"

"Meredith, please see reason. Release us before my father comes after us."

"Like he came after my borderlands?" she asked, her voice rising. "Like he scared my tenants away and burned their farms? Like that?"

She was losing control. The corked bottle of evil inside her belly rattled. She tried to breathe,

but it was getting more difficult to stay calm with Ty staring at her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he answered.

She wanted to believe him.

But she didn’t.

“Will you bring food and drink?” he asked. “If not for me, at least for Rainey.”

She couldn’t afford to show mercy, not with King Leonid banging on her walls. “Maybe another couple days in my shadow cell will convince you to talk.” She turned her back on him and left.

III

Meredith did not return before Ty surrendered to exhaustion, his sister's head on his shoulder. The queen had not returned by the time they woke at what must be dawn. But without windows, it was impossible to say what was morning and what was night. A shadow cell, indeed.

He eased Rainey onto her side so she could sleep longer, and then stood and stretched his aching muscles.

When the outer wooden door finally opened Ty's traitorous stomach rumbled. But Meredith brought only water and bread. She placed the meager meal in Rainey's side of the cell, a clear message the food was not for him.

He remembered both of the guards trailing her quite clearly. The taller of the two had tried to defend his queen the night before, and he was the same man who'd felled Ty on the battlefield.

"Good morning, Your Highness," Ty growled, but in anger as much as exhaustion. He didn't mind being a captive, not of Meredith's, but he grew weary of sleeping in a cage.

"Will you answer my questions now?" she asked.

"If they are the same questions," he said, "my answers must be the same." Losing even more of his patience, he added, "My father will ride here posthaste to seek vengeance. Release us so we may meet him on the road and perhaps convince him not to hurt you or your people in retribution."

He didn't add there would be almost zero chance of that happening. King Leonid was not an understanding sort of monarch.

"He has burned my lands and stolen my cousin." Her fists clenched at her sides. "I cannot let him get away with it. If I don't fight back, he will trample all over me."

"So you torture his children?" Ty returned, hoping she'd see reason. "He will retaliate. And then *you* must retaliate. And so on, and so on."

"It is his way. I am only playing by his rules."

Ty cared about her, even after so many years. He didn't want to see her kingdom invaded and her home razed. Because there was no doubt which army would win this war.

"It wasn't always that way," he said quietly, approaching the bars. "Our two kingdoms used to be allies. Do you remember?"

Her cheeks flushed pink, but from anger or something else, he didn't know.

"We were children when we were betrothed," she said stiffly. "You cannot mean to reinstate

it?"

"Why not? Let's pretend you sent an escort to bring me here for a secret meeting. No one has to know you abducted us. Let's become allies again, Meredith. You probably don't believe me, but I only wish the best for you." His fingers snaked through the bars and clasped her fisted hand.

Gasping, she stumbled out of reach. "You shouldn't touch me!"

"I'm not afraid of you, Meredith."

"You should be."

"Why," he asked, "because of the rumors?"

Meredith turned on her guard. "Leave us."

"But, Your Highness—"

"I wish to speak to the prisoner alone." Her eyes sparkled with royal annoyance. "Do not question me again."

He bowed and then departed, closing the door behind him.

She closed more distance between her and Ty, glancing fleetingly at the little girl curled up in the corner of the cell, still asleep.

"You know me," she whispered. "You know it's not a rumor."

He nodded. "But you would never hurt anyone."

"Not on purpose, but I have no more control now than I did when we were children."

"You're not black-hearted," he said.

And she almost believed him, he was so sure of it.

"What does your father want with Beatrice?" she asked. "He must have known I would respond with force."

"I don't know anything about Beatrice," he said, approaching the bars and wrapping his long fingers around the two near her face. "He doesn't share his policies with me, let alone any kidnapping plots. He never has."

She grabbed the bars directly under his hands. "You should rule Tamb. You're a much better man than your father. He is rotting with anger and vengeance."

"I wish that as well."

He pressed his body against the bars, and, as if her muscles were not hers to control, she did the same. Nothing separated them but a couple of inches of cold, hard iron.

"His men invaded my borderlands," she told him. "They burned fields and homes. And now

my cousin is missing." She lifted her face to study his reaction. "If I don't hold him back, he will run roughshod across my kingdom, destroying everything I have worked so hard to preserve. You must see that I have no choice but to fight back."

"I didn't know that," he confessed. "He claims your farmers are encroaching on our land. He says he is defending his kingdom."

She shook her head.

"I will speak with him," Ty assured. "I will do everything I can to end this pointless war."

"I didn't intend to capture you or Rainey," she said, wanting him to know that she hadn't grown into a cruel or vengeful person in his absence. "But once you killed Sean, I had no choice. And I must admit, capturing the prince and princess of Tamb has given me more leverage than I ever expected. Now, Leonid will have to listen to me."

"No, Meredith," he said, "you have sealed your fate. He will stop at nothing until he punishes you for the insult. Because," he added, "you took something that belongs to him. It's the excuse he's been waiting for to begin a full assault on Brighton Castle." His lips thinned. "I'm sorry."

He was right. Ty always had a good head for strategy. "Then I'll just have to think of something else to do to make him back off."

Ty reached through the bars and brushed a dark curl off her cheek. Meredith stood very still, her nerve endings vibrating at his touch.

"I miss you," he whispered, his breath feather light against her lips. "I miss talking to you."

"So do I." Made brave by the kindness in his blue eyes, she covered his hand with hers.

The outer door scraped open. "Your Highness?"

Meredith reluctantly drew away from the bars and nodded at her guard. "Yes?"

"You are needed at the east tower, Your Highness."

"Of course." She hurried from the dark room.

Her guard remained behind.

* * *

"You're not very cooperative, are you?" the guard jeered at Tyson. "Time to soften you up some."

"I am under the queen's protection," Ty reminded him. Though he wouldn't have minded teaching this one some manners. *Just unlock my cell. I will be happy to fight.*

"The queen's not here." The guard made a show of inspecting various weapons. "You remember those farms that burned? One was my father's. I think I'll take my revenge from the

princess' back."

Ty flinched, glancing over his shoulder at Rainey. The child was just waking up. "I'll do anything you want, if you promise not to hurt her."

"Good boy." Grinning, the guard unlocked the cell and pointed at the whipping post. "Kneel."

Ty stepped from the cage, and the other man secured the door. "So long as I have your word. Not a finger upon her head."

"No," Rainey protested, scrambling to the locked cell door and rattling it. "Don't hurt him!"

"You have my word, *Your Highness*. Kneel."

Ty removed his shirt and dropped to his knees upon the cold stone floor. "Rainey," he said as the guard tied his wrists to the top of the post. "Don't watch, little bug. Turn away."

The first lash split the flesh of his back, and he bucked in pain, clenching his jaws tight to keep from crying out.

But by the ninth or tenth stroke, the pain was so intense he lost all sense of himself or his surroundings. He screamed.

* * *

Meredith burst through the dungeon's outer door. "King Leonid is at the gates. They won't—" She stuttered to a stop, her entire body reacting to the sight before her.

Ty was slumped against the whipping post, his back a mess of blood and flayed flesh, and her guard stood over him with a braided whip covered in blood. Rainey sobbed into her hands in the corner of her cell.

"What have you done?" Meredith demanded, rushing to Ty. "I never told you to hurt him."

"There's no where left to run," the guard replied. "King Leonid will have all our heads. We might as well make this Tamb dog pay for Sean's murder while we still have blood in our veins."

"Not Ty." Meredith brushed the side of his face, hot to the touch, and came away with blood on her fingers.

"The prisoners in the shadow cells have always been my responsibility," the guard reminded her with no emotion registering whatsoever.

Shock devolved into fury. Meredith stuck out her hand for his weapon.

With only a shiver of reluctance, he passed her the whip.

Meredith held it for a moment, testing the weight, as her rage whirled out of control. The cork in the bottle popped open, and the evil inside her surfaced. She cracked the whip, only the very tip clipping his bare arm, but the tiny winged devils inside her passed through the braided cord and

into him. The guard made a gurgling sound and collapsed, shaking and quivering in pain as the cut on his arm split wider, festered, and gushed pus and blood.

The heavy wooden door to the dungeon banged against the stone wall and what seemed like an army filled the room. The man who led them, with his fiery red hair and legendary long sword now drenched in Brighton blood, was impossible to mistake.

King Leonid had come for his children.

Meredith imagined the scene from his cold-eyed perspective. His daughter curled inside a cage, his son lashed into unconsciousness, and his rival, Queen Meredith holding the whip.

Sobbing, Rainey ran headlong into her father, her choked words incoherent. Lord Tamb passed her off to one of his men, who spirited her away.

“For God’s sake,” the king ordered in a raw voice, “cut him down.”

Meredith felt eyes upon her. She dropped the whip and stumbled away as three Tamb soldiers gently laid Ty upon the ground. But Meredith’s gaze remained on Ty’s father. She could not mistake the look of pure hatred in his eyes when he returned her stare.

“You’ll pay for this in blood,” he swore. To his men, he said, “Tie her to the post.”

IV

Pain. Searing, rending pain with every breath. Lying face down upon a bed, the flesh on Ty's back felt ripped from his bones. Slowly he remembered the shadow cell, Meredith, and the whipping post.

"Rainey?" He struggled to roll over.

"Shh," came a familiar, feminine voice. "Lie still. Rainey's safe."

"Clara?" he guessed, wilting onto the mattress. "Where's Meredith?"

"Don't trouble yourself," she cooed, a cool cloth coming down upon his back. "You need to lie still."

"Are we in the capital?" he asked. "How long have we been here?"

"Father carried you home three days ago."

Ty groaned in frustration. "You gave me one of your sleeping potions."

"Trust me, you needed it, brother." She gently applied another strip of moistened cloth to his ravaged back. "You were in agony."

"I want to see Meredith." He was afraid his father had hurt her. Or worse.

"The witch queen isn't important right now," Clara said.

Ty had heard enough. Sucking in a breath against the pain, he sat up and shoved to his feet.

"I will see her with my own eyes."

"Of course you will," Clara complained with a sigh. But she steadied him. "She occupies a cell downstairs."

Horrible fantasies taunted him of Meredith tortured, Meredith beaten, Meredith strung up from the rafters. And he still wasn't prepared for the actual sight of her.

Shuffling through the dungeon door and down a long hallway, Ty stood over her. She lay curled in a cage meant for a dog, her knees forced to her chest, her pretty gown torn and filthy. She'd been bound with heavy shackles, both hands and feet. Her face was bruised and bloody. Ty closed his eyes momentarily in dull shock.

"Meredith?" he called. He wanted to bend down and free her, but his wounds prevented him. "For God's sake, answer me." When no reply came, he rounded on his sister. "How could you allow this?"

"My God," Clara spit, "you were practically in pieces when they brought you to me. I think she deserves *worse*."

"Ty?" Meredith shifted in the cramped cage. "You're alive?"

"Yes, my sweet." Despite the pain in his back, he crouched down to free her from her bindings. "I know it hurts." Ty's voice cracked. "But I'll make it better."

Gritting his teeth, he lifted her into his arms and stood.

"You'll injure yourself," Clara complained from the doorway. "I worked hard to keep you alive."

Ignoring his sister, he buried his nose in Meredith's hair. "I've got you, my sweet." In his arms, she was a sack of straw, incredibly light.

"What will I tell Father when he finds out you've commuted her sentence?" Clara called after him, her tone cruel.

"Tell him the queen is my prisoner. Her crime is against me, and I will punish her as I see fit."

Clara grumbled something under her breath, and then said, "If you'll get back into bed, I'll do it."

Ty carried Meredith upstairs and laid her carefully in his bed. As he peeled off her clothing, he was weak with relief to have her near. Not that he wished her injured and in pain, but it was wonderful to see and touch her again.

"Clara, get me water and bandages," he ordered his sister.

"Why are you showing her mercy?" Clara asked, lingering in the doorway.

Ty paused in examining the bruises on Meredith's back. "Because I love her," he said, giddy with the admission. "I never stopped. Not even after father broke our engagement." He stared hard at his sister, forcing her to see the truth in his eyes. "I love her."

Clara was silent for a moment, and then she straightened. "I'll return shortly."

As his sister hurried away, Meredith groaned. "Ty?"

"Don't worry," he said, stroking hair from her face. "I'm going to clean and dress your wounds. Were you whipped?"

"No." She hid her face among his pillows. "I'm sorry," she said, shiny tears escaping her closed eyes. "I never wanted to hurt you."

"I know."

"Here." Clara returned with medical supplies and Rainey.

"I should go and let Clara tend you," Ty said.

"No." Meredith grabbed his sleeve. "My reputation cannot get any worse. Please, stay."

"Of course."

Clara was a skilled healer and quickly washed the dirt from Meredith's skin and then covered the two worst scrapes. "The rest are bruises and will fade with time," she explained.

"Thank you," Meredith said, catching the other woman's eye and smiling.

"It was nothing." Clara piled the used supplies on the floor. Before she rang for a servant to take it away, she added, "Your Highness."

Feeling every one of Meredith's injuries, Ty curled beside her on the bed. She scooted nearer, so they were face to face. Her knees bumped his, and he smiled.

"I'm so glad you're here," he whispered. "I'm not letting you get away again."

"I'm a prisoner of war," she reminded him quietly. "Your father wishes to hang me."

Ty wiggled even closer and cupped her face in his hands. Meredith reached for him, gripping his shirt in both fists.

"I won't let that happen," he said.

* * *

But Meredith didn't believe him. She'd seen Tyson bend to his father's will before. "You were there when he broke our engagement. You heard him call me a witch. And you didn't defend me." The betrayal still stung.

"That won't happen again," he assured, his thumb stroking her cheek. "I swear it. You belong to me as I belong to you."

Meredith dared to hope he was right. "I don't even care how Sean died. It matters not."

Ty gave her a little squeeze as he said, "I didn't kill your brother." She was quiet, so he added, "You saw Sean lying dead, and me standing over him. But I swear to you," he said, silently pleading with her to believe him, "I did not kill him."

"I believe you," she said. And then softly, "I thought of you every day we were separated."

"And I you." His eyes fluttered closed, as if too exhausted to continue their conversation. She took a closer look at his face and found him unnaturally pale.

Ignoring the females scrutinizing her, Meredith climbed to her knees, peeled Ty's shirt up past his shoulders, and removed the bandages.

What she found stole her breath away.

"His wound is festering." If it got worse the infection would kill him. Already the edges of his torn flesh were black and rotten.

"You could heal him," Rainey piped up, "because you're a witch."

Meredith didn't refute the truth. She *was* a witch. But not the kind who helped the sick. The kind who caused unending pain and misery and death.

"I've never healed anyone before," she said, smoothing the cloth strips back into place. "I could just as easily kill him."

"You healed me once," Ty said, reaching for her.

Meredith clasped his hand and recalled the time, as children, they'd snuck away to ride Ty's horse into the woods. But the horse had gotten spooked and threw them. Ty broke his leg. She'd mended the break, but it had been so long ago she didn't remember how she'd managed it. Since then, nothing but evil had resided inside her.

"You can do it," Ty said. "Please, Meredith. It hurts."

She pictured him tall and strong and beautiful, the way she always remembered him. The bottle rattled, and out rushed her little demons. *This time will be different.* She would do good works, for once.

But demons only know chaos and pain.

Her evil power poured from her hand into Ty. Meredith tried to cork the bottle, but too late.

No.

His sores split and widened. Ty howled in pain. Blood and pus gushed from the wounds as he writhed.

"No, no," she gasped, afraid to touch him again, afraid she'd killed him at the very moment she'd finally won him back.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. The sisters near the door both squeaked in surprise as their father stormed into the room.

King Leonid, enraged, backhanded Meredith so hard he knocked her off the bed.

"Get this damned witch out of my sight."

V

Meredith had given up pacing her cell in the Tamb Castle dungeons and sat hunched in the corner, cold and crying. She was a curse upon the Earth. A plague on humanity.

"Are you here?" came a tiny, girlish voice from the other end of the room. "Your Highness?"

Meredith fought a laugh. She was no queen. A demon, yes, but not worthy of titles and pleasantries. Not anymore.

"I am here." She didn't bother standing.

Rainey dashed to her cell and gripped the bars. "Your Highness, you must come with me."

"Is he dead?" Meredith whispered back. "Please, tell me. Did I kill Tyson?"

"He's alive, but not for long," Rainey explained. "The healers have all gone. You must come with me, now."

She wiped her tears and left grit on both grubby cheeks. "I'm full of evil, child. I've killed him."

"You healed him once."

"Did he tell you about that?"

"He said you were glorious."

Meredith snorted. "He exaggerated."

Rainey unlocked the cell door.

"Tell me one thing," Meredith asked. "Did you kill my brother?" She didn't pause long enough to let her respond. Meredith already knew the answer, anyway. "You did, didn't you?" If she hadn't been so distraught at the sight of Tyson Tamb standing over Sean's lifeless body, she would've realized the truth immediately. "Ty was protecting you. Of course he was."

"I'm sorry," Rainey admitted. "I didn't mean to. He fell on me, and my knife went into him."

"It wasn't your fault." Sean knew the price of fighting a war. "He was a soldier, and soldiers die in battle."

"Please, Your Highness," Rainey said, beckoning her forward. "Please don't let my brother die."

Meredith hesitated, staring at the portal to her freedom. "What if I kill him? I couldn't live with myself."

"You already hurt him," Rainey said. "Now you have to help him."

"I don't know how to help," she said, turning her face away from the door. "I can't control it."

If I touch him, I'll hurt him worse."

Rainey kicked the door in obvious frustration. "Then find a way to control it!" The girl continued wretchedly, "This is all my fault. If I hadn't run onto the battlefield then we wouldn't have been captured and Ty wouldn't have been whipped. *I did this.*"

"No, child," Meredith soothed.

As if she hadn't heard, Rainey said, "Ty told me I never think before I act. Well, I've been thinking a lot recently. And you are the only person in the world who can save my brother's life."

Meredith shook her head sadly. She wished it were true.

"You haven't seen the land around the keep," Rainey said. "After your spell, it exploded with life. Flowers, grass, butterflies, birds ... You wouldn't believe it." Her voice dropped. "Father said you fed Tyson's soul to the earth."

"I wouldn't do that." Meredith pushed to her feet. "I don't know how to do that."

But Rainey plowed on, not listening. "If you can siphon his soul into the ground, then you must be able to borrow from the earth and heal him. All of nature is a balance, is it not? A give and take?"

Meredith was ashamed she'd never considered her power in such a way. She'd spent so many years trying to hide it, to reduce its impact, she'd never studied all of its facets.

But if there was any hope at all... If she could save her friend's life... "Take me to Tyson."

Several winding staircases, two darkened hallways, and a creep across a quiet gallery later, and they were standing in the prince's bedroom.

Meredith knew it was bad when she found Ty lying, not on his bed, but on a high, long table. Face up. No one would lay a flayed man on his back unless there was no chance of his survival.

The table was too small for him. His heels hung off the end.

She rushed to his side and pressed her ear to his chest. "His heart is barely beating. His breath is but a wisp of air."

"Come to see your handiwork, witch?" King Leonid stepped from the shadows beside the balcony doors. But he wasn't angry. He must have resigned himself to the fact that his son and heir was dying.

"Father, she's going to help," Rainey blurted out. "Let her try. She's done it before."

Meredith grew more hesitant and anxious under the king's scrutiny. She may be a queen, but she'd been beaten and caged and left to rot for three days. She was scared.

"I don't think," she stuttered, a death grip on Ty's cold, limp hand. "I'm not..."

"He's been hurt enough by you," Leonid announced.

"She won't hurt him, Father," Rainey shouted. "She loves him."

Leonid's eyes narrowed. "What does a witch know of love?"

Meredith had loved Ty, once upon a time, when her kingdom and Leonid's had been allies. Before the Red King broke her and Ty's engagement, along with so many other promises.

"I love him," Meredith declared. "I would have married him years ago and avoided all this strife and violence. But you broke your word."

"It became known to me that you are a witch," he answered calmly. "Do you think I'd ever let a witch marry my son? Let alone rule a kingdom as my equal?"

"If she heals Ty," Rainey interrupted, "you have to leave her alone and let her marry him. Right, Father?"

"Can you save his life, or not?" Leonid asked bluntly.

Rainey opened her mouth, but the king shushed the little girl.

"Yes," Meredith said, picturing the balmy summer afternoon she'd mended Ty's broken leg. "I think I can."

"If you save my son's life," Leonid said, "I would do anything." He cleared his throat, fading back into the shadows. "Anything you ask."

Meredith laid her cheek upon Ty's chest and focused on his faint heartbeat. "I can heal you," she whispered, sensing the bottle within her rattling. *I am not evil.*

She trusted that Rainey was right. If Meredith had given Tyson's energy to the earth, then she could transfer power from the ground into Ty.

"Control," she whispered.

The cork popped, and Meredith realized her power wasn't made of tiny winged demons after all. No, they were cherubs. Sighing, Meredith passed her power through her body and into Ty's.

* * *

Tyson rolled onto his side, feeling crispy and feverish as if he'd fallen asleep in the sun. Small, cool hands urged him to lie down, but he wanted to be on his feet. He had an underlying fear that something was wrong.

"Help me get him to the bed."

Meredith's voice.

"I thought I'd lost you again." He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her

hair, inhaling her scent.

"Never again," she promised.

"You healed me," he said softly. "I feel the same way I did after the horse threw us."

"It was your influence," she admitted. "You made me want to turn the darkest parts of myself into something beautiful."

There was a commotion outside the open balcony doors, which only grew in volume. Fearing an attack, Ty stumbled for the perch, taking Meredith with him.

But no soldiers gathered on the ground below.

"Magic," he breathed. As far as he could see the former grasslands surrounding the keep were scorched earth, nothing but ash and stone.

A footstep behind them, and Ty whirled on his father.

Leonid's expression registered shock and awe. "I've never seen anything like this in my life."

"Father," Ty said, locking his fingers with Meredith's. "We will be married immediately, and we will rule together." He was ashamed of his behavior years earlier, and he could only excuse some of it on being young. The rest was his fear. But no more. "You will cease all attacks on Brighton borderlands, and you will release Lady Beatrice from whatever hovel you've hidden her in." He stared at his father, daring him to argue.

But Leonid only nodded. Turning and rushing for the bedroom door, he shouted to whoever happened to be nearby, "Summon my lieutenants. This war ends today."

With a relieved sigh, Meredith embraced Ty, leaning her weight against him. He held her up easily, cherishing the way they fit together.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, Tyson," she said into his shirt.

He held her, overwhelmed at his good fortune. "You don't have a black heart, Meredith Brighton," he whispered. "Your heart is open and full of light."

She tilted her head up, and it was such an easy thing to dip his chin and kiss her.

THE END

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