

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS THE prettiest car crash I'd ever seen. I wouldn't even call it a car crash, even though that was how the lady on the police radio described it.

The car itself—a sleek, red four-door sedan with a cool spoiler and tire covers so clean they practically sparkled under the glare of my flashlight—had apparently been heading down the highway at 60 miles an hour before suddenly pulling off the road and onto the grass on either side of the road. It had stopped in front of a fence which surrounded an abandoned church and graveyard. My gaze briefly paused on the church, which looked eerie in the darkness of the night, before my eyes turned back to the 'crashed' car.

The car's condition was pretty good. It had scrapped against the fence when it went off the road, which was obvious when you noticed the scrapped off paint on the passenger's side, but otherwise, it seemed to be in near perfect condition. I kept forgetting that amages—that is, people who lacked magic and were not part of the magical community, unlike me—were more easily panicked than us mages and seemed to treat every stressful situation as if it was the end of the world.

Then again, it was very dark and late at night. I was something of a night owl myself, so when the police radio in my office spoke of a car crash a few miles outside of town that needed an immediate response, I pulled on my jacket and headed out as fast as I could. But I could see how someone who was driving by might look at the skid marks on the road, see the still car with a smoking engine off the side of the road, and assume some kind of car crash had happened. Especially if they just kept driving, though most amages wouldn't understand *why* they kept driving. I didn't, either, but I had my theories and none of them involved anything as ordinary as drunk driving or a blown tire.

Speaking of the smoking engine, I walked up to the front of the car and popped the hood. Raising the hood, I aimed my flashlight down and saw that the engine was indeed damaged, but not irreparably so. It didn't look like an ordinary engine failure. The holes from which the smoke issued looked like claw marks as if a lion had slashed through the engine.

But I knew that no lion could possibly have done this because Texas didn't have any wild lions and I had not heard of any reports of lions escaping from any of the zoos. There was one kind of creature, however, which I knew *could* slash the engine of a moving car without being seen. The amage cops who should up to answer the emergency call wouldn't be able to make sense of it, but I would, and I didn't have much time to finish my investigation and confirm my theory before the police showed up.

Shutting the hood, I held up my flashlight and said, "Simon, have you found the lady's ghost yet?"

There was a brief pause before something small, black, and furry darted out from underneath the car. It was a black and white cat, who jumped on top of the car's hood and sat, looking up at me with his unnatural purple eyes. His tail swishing back and forth, Simon almost looked like an ordinary cat, though I knew Simon, as my familiar, was not an ordinary cat.

"Nope," said Simon promptly. He licked his paw and began cleaning his face. "I tried talking to her, but she wouldn't answer. Rather rude, if you ask me."

"There's no way the driver could have been dead for more than five minutes, at most," I said, scratching my chin thoughtfully. "Her spirit should still be lingering around here, even if only in a weak form. At the very least, you should be able to speak to it."

"I don't know, Noah," said Simon with a shrug. "There aren't any hard and fast rules about the spirits of the dead. Depends on how happy they were with their life. If they're happy and have no

regrets—” Simon snorted when he said that, “—then they usually just pass right on to the afterlife. If they’re depressed and have a lot of unfinished business on God’s green Earth, then their spirit can linger for years and become meaner and meaner as time goes. You remember the Porter mansion ghost, don’t you?”

“Don’t remind me,” I said. “But how could the driver have died so suddenly? Her car didn’t even actually crash.”

“Heart attack, maybe?” said Simon. “She’s an older lady, probably in her fifties or so. She’s also quite fat.”

“Possibly, but we need to exhaust all possibilities first before we jump to any conclusions,” I said. “Let me see her body.”

I walked around the front of the car to the driver’s side. I waved a hand at the car door, casting a spell which unlocked it, and then pulled the door open and pointed my flashlight inside.

The woman who lay slumped against the wheel was indeed quite fat, as Simon so eloquently put it. She reminded me of my own mother somewhat, except my mom at least knew how to take care of her appearance and make her size work for her rather than against her. This woman wore too tight clothing and short shorts which would have looked better on a much younger and slimmer woman but which only served to emphasize her weight on her. The only part of her appearance which she seemed to care about was her hair, which was done in neat curls, but other than that, she looked like a slob to me.

She also looked unconscious, rather than dead, but Simon had already figured out that she had died when the car came to a stop on the side of the road. That was another reason I doubted this was a car crash. If she had died while driving, the car would have run off the road and crashed *into*, rather than *against*, the fence. Maybe she pulled her car over onto the side of the road and then died, but that didn’t seem likely to me, either.

I reached over and poked her shoulder. No movement, though her skin was unnaturally cold, which didn’t make sense, given how she couldn’t have died more than a few minutes ago at best. Bodies didn’t cool that fast.

But what I found most odd about her body was the lack of visible wounds. From what I could see, her body was completely unharmed. No cuts or scratches or open wounds or anything like that. For all intents and purposes, it seemed like she had just died while driving. That didn’t make sense, because while she wasn’t a spring chicken, she also didn’t seem old enough to die of natural causes. Nor did she seem to have any medical problems, aside from her weight, but I’d never heard of even an obese person just suddenly dying without warning like that.

I stood up and considered the evidence. Unnaturally cold skin, no visible wounds or injuries, leaning against the wheel like she had fallen asleep while driving, her spirit not lingering ... and then there was the slashed car engine in the front. The pieces of the puzzle were starting to go together in my mind, but the conclusion they suggested was one I didn’t want to consider, yet it was also the only one that made sense.

There was only one way to find out.

I leaned forward and, aiming the flashlight at her face, forced open her left eye.

It was completely white.

“Simon,” I said, standing upright and weaving my flashlight back and forth, “I know what killed the woman now.”

"You do?" said Simon, who was sitting on the top of the car, his black tail swishing back and forth. "Was it obesity? Obesity can cause heart problems, which is the number one killer of American women, and she's quite big, so—"

"No, it wasn't obesity, you dumb cat," I snapped. "It was a—"

Out of the corner of my eye, something shot out of the shadows toward me. I raised my hand and cast a shield spell, instantly conjuring a thin but impenetrable energy barrier in front of me. The thing which had shot out of the shadows slammed into the barrier and went stumbling backward, grunting in surprise.

I dismissed the barrier and aimed my flashlight at the dazed creature which lay on the ground before me.

The creature looked almost like a teenage human, with unnaturally pale skin and coal black hair that seemed to fade into the shadows. Yet his messy hair could not hide the tiny horns poking out from his crown or the barbed tail poked out between his legs. He was a skinny creature, almost skeletal, and he reeked of death, but I knew from experience not to judge these monsters based solely on their physical appearances.

"Holy crap," said Simon, staring at the fallen creature, which was still dazed from running head first into my barrier. "That's not what I think it is, is it?"

"It is," I said. "A demon. And not just any demon, either, but the murderer of this woman."

"Murderer?" said Simon, looking at me all of a sudden. "But I don't see any claw marks on her."

"It ate her soul," I said, throwing an annoyed look at Simon. "That's why you can't talk to her soul and why she died all of a sudden because there is no soul to talk to."

"Ah," said Simon, nodding. "Makes sense. Are you gonna kill it?"

I turned away from Simon to focus on the demon and raised a hand. Blue fire crackled in my free hand as I said, "I have no choice. The Ancient Laws state that all demons are to be killed on sight. I may not be a demon slayer anymore, but I still have to follow the Laws like anyone else."

I threw a blue fireball at the demon, but the demon rolled to the side and avoided the fireball, which struck the ground where he had been lying and set it on fire. The demon lunged toward me, claws outstretched, but I summoned a blade of blue light in my hands and slashed at the demon as it drew closer toward me.

The demon cried out in pain as my sword cut open its chest. It dropped to the ground, but before it could react, I kicked it in the chin, sending the demon staggering backward. Moving in closer, I slashed at the demon, but it dropped into the darkness underneath it and my sword missed it entirely.

"Where did it go?" said Simon in surprise, his head whipping back and forth urgently.

"No idea, but don't let your guard down," I said, looking this way and that as I searched for the demon, "this demon clearly isn't a higher class one, but that doesn't make it any less dangerous, especially toward familiars."

"Stop speaking about me like I'm some kind of wild animal," said a voice behind me, "it's rather offensive."

I whirled around to see the demon standing in front of the car, a wicked grin on his face. His chest wound must have healed quickly because when I pointed my flashlight at him, the wound was missing.

"You demons aren't any better than beasts," I said. "Forgive me if I'm not as polite to soul eaters like you as I should be. My parents always taught me you had to earn respect before you could ask for it."

The demon chuckled. "Indeed, your parents taught you many things, didn't they, Noah House?"

I stiffened. "How do you know my name? I've never even met you."

The demon chuckled again. "Every demon knows the name of the great Noah House, the Chosen One who slew the Demon Lord Raith five years ago. Yet here you are now, reduced to investigating the murders of insignificant amage women like some commoner. Your fall from grace must have been spectacular."

I scowled. "How I got here is none of your business. And it won't stop me from killing you like the animal you are."

The demon leaned forward, rubbing his claws together eagerly. "Oh, how you got here *is* my business, Noah House. Or, as you are better known to your fellow mages, the Butcher of Souls."

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