

# A BAGFUL OF DRAGON

Inayat isn't a witch. She's a not-quite-ordinary twenty-something, screwing up her life one failed date at a time. But when she dumps the wrong magician, Inayat finds herself in a bubbling cauldron of paranoid fear.

The arrival of an unusual bag of jewellery heralds an alarming increase in frightening events, dragging Inayat and her friends into the magical web spun by her adversary. He wants something Inayat has and he's prepared to take her spirit if she resists.

Inayat has only dabbled in magic before, but now she must learn fast or lose for all eternity. She's got plenty of fight in her, but is it enough, or will she succumb to the hatred of a man who just can't lose?



Sakina Murdock lives with her dog, her partner and his two cats in bonny rural Cumbria and tries to stay out of trouble. She chats with blackbirds, rescues toads from traffic, protects deer from hunters and writes exciting, magical fiction.

Look out for more of her paranormal fantasy books coming soon.

To find out more about Sakina, visit [SakinaMurdock.com](http://SakinaMurdock.com).



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by

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This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events, is entirely coincidental.

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For Shirley G.





## 1. Visitation

*Pressure. Weight. Crushing me into the mattress. A dark, airless burden across my body, heavy like a man lying on top of me. I open my mouth, to breathe, to scream. No oxygen, no air at all. Cloying darkness fingers its way into my throat. Suffocation stoppers my thoughts, unleashes panic. I buck my body, push his weight off as I break the paralysis of sleep and claw my way into the unsympathetic night.*

*He plants a tiny kiss on my forehead and leaves.*



Still blind in the blank darkness at the back of my room, I was smacked to full awareness by the dream's significance. I rolled off the bed onto the floor and hugged my knees.

I dropped my consciousness down to my pounding chest cavity and clicked my fingers three times. "Protect,

protect, protect!”

The programmed violet light glowed inside my heart chakra and exploded through my centre, a wave of bright energy clearing away the metaphysical gunge of fear and anger left by the intrusion.

Across the dim room, a chink of morning light through the blinds gently formed familiar outlines, comforting in their stoic sameness. The desk below the window. The computer screen and the chair. Everything else a familiar jumble of possessions and clothes in my too-small room. Thanks to Indira’s kindness, the guest-bedroom-cum-cloakroom of the rather posh apartment in a former stately home had become my haven after my ridiculous life sent me down yet another dead end.

The full length mirror across the room showed my defensive shape in the darkness, a shield of long brown hair across my face. I shook it back, still looking at myself and self-consciously straightened, chin raised, features yellowy in the dispersed crack of daylight.

I felt tenuously outwards for the intruder. No-one there. Not even a hint. No sense of him—whoever he was—but a genuine visitation for sure. The lingering adrenaline in my stomach, heart still knocking against my ribs—all were emotional residues, detritus rarely left by ordinary dreams. My interior being was shocked and empty. Vandalised and unclean.

Visitations, in my limited experience, normally come on the drift-off to sleep. Someone travels to you on the astral plane to tell you something important, usually unpleasant. This one was different. More real somehow, less fleeting, though I'd only become aware of him moments before I woke.

'Him'—but who?

I'd known a few witches and pagans from hanging out with Caleb, a whole 'friendship group' of hippies and activists who welcomed me in when I was flavour of his year and cut me off the moment he started fucking about. I'd seen none of them since I ran away from that life and I didn't regret it. Trust is hard to come by. Most people don't work hard enough at it and none of Caleb's mates had. I doubted anyone from back then would bother to torment me. Not even one of his witchy exes. Was there someone I knew now who hadn't disclosed their magical interests?

A light pinged on in the living room, bright through the roller blind on my glass bedroom door, startling me out of my thoughts.

"Hi, Inayat, want a cup of tea?" Indira's voice was muffled through the closed door.

"Nah, I'll get a coffee." Tea in the morning, yuck.

Jumping up, I grabbed my woollen robe, sticking my arm through the wrong hole and bumping into the door frame as I awkwardly swapped the garment around. The grog fuzzed

up my head and I lurched through the door into the wide open space of the living room, dragging my hair back behind my ears in an effort to see where I was going. Indira pulled the blinds at the massive windows and a beam of sunlight hit me painfully in the eyes. It physically knocked me backwards into the doorway.

David. It was David.

I gripped the door frame at the catch, grounding myself with the cold feel of the metal corners. The knowledge had slipped into my mind like an information injection.

Of all the sorry excuses I'd been out with, surely David was least likely to be a problem. A walking embodiment of 'mild-mannered', he worked for some kind of private charity 'helping indigenous peoples live the way they want'. Nice beneficial job, lots of money, just seriously lacking charisma. He kept the name of the charity from me, elusive without seeming secretive. Come to think of it, I knew pretty much nothing about him of any value.

I've seen some seriously challenging behaviour from men before, but I'd never been assaulted in my dreams. Creeping around on the astral plane was teen witch territory. I'd done it myself when I was experimenting with lucid dreaming, but who lies on top of someone? His weight had been too real.

"What's up, hun?" Never a morning person, Indira squinted sleepily at me, her fingers wrapped around a steaming mug as she leaned against the white mantelpiece of the retired

fireplace, dwarfed by its immense size. I watched the smoky tendrils spiralling upwards towards the chandelier in the high ceiling, then focused on her puzzled expression.

“Someone came to see me,” I blurted. See me. In my space. My head. Lying on top of me.

“Last night?”

“In my dreams.”

A heavy pause followed. Me—shell-shocked as the implications poured in—slumping against the wall because it was holding me up. The space in the room was overwhelming, weighing heavily on me. Exposure swamped me. He was only there for one reason. The same reason any man might creep secretly into a woman’s bed. But why me, why me, why me? All I wanted was a normal life. Something that I could call ordinary. No out-of-control relationships and feeling like shit because I never understand why people behave the way they do to me. I was so fucking sick of not understanding.

Indira peered at me, perhaps searching for sense in my face. She placed her mug on the mantel and pulled her black hair into a loose pony tail.

“Kettle’s boiled, hun.”

I took a long, deep breath and busied myself with a shitty instant coffee at the breakfast bar. As I threw in four heaped teaspoons of sugar, my mind grasped at everything and came up with nothing. Was he in love with me? How could he

be? He didn't know me. He'd been stood up by his internet date and I'd felt sorry for him. All I did was pretend—for his sake—to be his friend a couple of times. Probably no better than a super-cheap dial-a-date escort, paid only in free wine and dinner. I felt a bit sick. At least I hadn't slept with him.

He obviously thought I should have.

Indira said nothing, just sipped her tea and stared. For a moment I wondered how she really felt about me. I couldn't tell by looking, though I was fairly sure she cared. She lived with me for a start—we were now in our ninth month and hadn't ripped each other's heads off. We'd met at a yoga class that Leah had made me go to and Indira had bugged me to live with her from the second month I knew her. Actions always spoke louder than facial expressions, but sometimes I didn't feel like she was totally with me. Just didn't get me really.

I leaned on my elbows and sipped sugary coffee. It tasted like Marmite. "Remind me to get some proper coffee tonight. I hate this stuff."

Her black eyes examined my face. "What are you on about, hun? You going through a weird patch again?"

"I think someone did a kind of visitation on me last night."

She frowned. "What's a visitation?"

I took another gulp of coffee. "He came to see me in the ether, on the astral plane." My spiritual leanings weren't news to

Indira, but she didn't always know the terms. She didn't really believe any of it, so she didn't hold it against me. She just thought I was a bit strange. Endured my superstitions on her good days, pooh-poohed them on the bad ones. Religion mostly didn't interest her.

"Hmmm." Indira sank on to a big cushion on the solid parquet floor and huddled in her robe, sipping her tea. She was settling into the drama—her natural habitat—no doubt psychoanalysing me.

"Don't you think the more you mess with that stuff, the more you kid yourself that everyone else is doing it?"

I scowled. "I haven't been messing with anything. And I didn't think he was into that stuff." He never gave even a hint. For a moment, I doubted myself. Probably shouldn't have said anything about it to him at all. He'd read my palm, as a 'joke' after I'd hinted I was into magical stuff, but never said he knew anything about magic himself. Didn't get my personality right according to my palm, if that was anything to go by. I didn't go too far with what I knew anyway. I did operate some common sense here and there. Right. Maybe the visit was him just playing about. Either way, the visitor *was* him. I'd been handed the information. All I had to do was confirm it.

And then what?

I pictured his greasy, pale face and dank, mousy hair as he quipped something mildly amusing in his Edinburgh accent.

He had been desperate to impress me, but I just couldn't bring myself to take it a step beyond whatever label was appropriate for our brief friendship. A couple of platonic dates were one thing—but I didn't want to lead him on, that was the point. When he asked me out again at the end of the second I'd been straight with him. To know someone isn't interested is far better than hanging on for months, wondering.

So much for honesty.

Indira couldn't bear my silence. "You know who it was?" Her tiny elf nose wrinkled and her brown freckles seemed to pop off her face as her eyes widened with excitement. "It wasn't that guy you finished with last week, was it?"

My cup slipped in my hand and sticky beige coffee slopped on to the work surface. It splattered the car insurance papers and fuel bills spread across the counter near the wall.

"How do you do that?" I demanded as I mopped up the mess with a tea towel.

"Do what?" She swallowed some tea and folded her legs beneath her, gaze intent on me.

"You didn't even meet him, how do you know things? I thought I was the psychic one." I picked up my cup again, holding it more carefully. "It was him. I don't know how I know, I just do. He came and lay on top of me." I took a sip. He'd been there physically, I remembered his weight upon me. It wasn't just in my head.

Indira made a puking face. “Eww. I told you not to lead him on. What do you expect if you carry on like you’re going to marry them? Men don’t have an off-switch you know.”

Nausea rolled in my belly. “It was only a couple of dates!”

I didn’t offer him sex. Didn’t make myself available. Thought that was better than past performance. Did that mean I’d led him on? Of course it did. Served me fucking right once again.

During our dates his clammy fingers had scraped my hand a few times for one reason or another. Even when he’d read my palm, his touch made me shudder. Two dates was enough. I wasn’t that lonely and dating without caring was a slippery slope.

“At least I didn’t give the milk away for free.”

She tutted. “It doesn’t work unless you don’t lead them on either. A single date’s one thing, but two? You can’t just give them hope and then tell them nope. It isn’t fair.”

So much for standing beside me.

“How else am I supposed to work out if they’re okay?”

“Can’t you tell if you fancy them before you start?”

The tears rose and I couldn’t look at her. She was right. Of course I could tell. But I didn’t fall in love with a body, I fell for their minds. Just sometimes the ones that seemed to have nothing might turn out to be everything. But that had never yet happened conclusively. The ones that were everything never

wanted me.

Her voice softened a little. “Don’t cry, for heaven’s sake. All you did was dream about him.”

I dared to glance at her, but couldn’t say it fully. “He—came to—” The lump in my throat filled my voice box. “He lay on top of me.”

The distaste was clear in her downturned mouth. “In your dream. Ugh.”

“It wasn’t just a dream,” I snapped. “Visitations are different.”

She sighed. “You’re nuts, you know that, right? What’re you saying? He tried to rape you spiritually? Is that even a thing?” She looked sad. “How do you think that kind of thing up?”

Bile rose from my belly and I considered a dash to the bathroom, but calmed myself again. I drew in a long, deep breath, dropped my consciousness down to my centre and into the ground and steadied my stomach. More coffee. A rush of cold shivers overtook me. He came to rape me. I hoped I woke up in time.

“Creepy bastard.” It wasn’t like I could just go to the police, but I wasn’t without resources. “You’re not supposed to do that kind of thing in magic. It’s totally unethical.”

Indira’s tone was full-on common-sense mode. “Babe, what you did to him was pretty unethical, never mind magic. If

you mess with dangerous people, they'll always bite you first. You've got to start looking after yourself better. No-one else will. Stop looking for Mr. Right. He won't be out there until you give it up." Her well-meaning lecture was everything I'd heard before and it triggered me, but I didn't need a row on top of everything else. I tuned her out a little so I could think.

*What would Leah do?* The thought popped into my head, unbidden. I hadn't seen her for a few weeks, but I knew what she'd do anyway. No way would she let him get away without saying something. But she'd do it on the phone. I could go one better.

"I know." I would confirm it was him, let him know I knew what he'd done. Maybe he'd stay away then. If there was one thing I was good at, it was making a fuss in public.

Indira read my face instantly with apprehension. "Oh no. What are you going to do?"

I narrowed my eyes, enjoying the conspiratorial feel of my decision. I would have a good story to tell Leah when I saw her.



"Oh hi, I—I didn't think you would call again." His soft accent, tinny over the phone, irritated the hell out of me, but I swallowed stomach acid and grinned my hardest. You can always hear a person's expression down the phone. Luckily, you can't hear them keeping vomit down.

“Well, you know, I thought it might be nice to see you one last time. We can meet up this evening if you want?” *And you can buy me dinner*, I thought.

He took the bait, a cheerful tone in his voice. “That’s great. How about the Snooty Fox at seven o’clock? Do you want—?”

—“I’ll meet you there, that’s fab.” Puke. Leeds had dozens of pubs, but the Snooty Fox was near Roundhay Park, frequented by middle-class ale aficionados. Safe enough and the scene of our previous meetings.

“I’ve got that white sage I wanted to give you anyway, so I’ll bring that with me.”

The relief at his agreement set my heart pounding. “Great. That’s so kind of you.” He could shove his white sage into his deepest, darkest orifice.

I put the phone down and Indira was back in her position on the floor cushion, fully dressed, her chef’s whites stuffed into a holdall, the bag gaping open beside her. I realised she was up early because she must have the lunch time shift.

She sounded kinder now, less annoyed with me. “What you doing, babe? You’re not getting yourself in trouble are you?”

I grinned genuinely now. “At least he’ll know I know about his little journey. Might put him off doing it again to me or someone else. A bit of public humiliation.”

Indira’s eyes sparkled with excitement, but tried to

maintain a stern expression. “Do you think it’s a good idea doing it publicly?”

“Best place for it! You don’t get to just walk into someone’s private space and fuck them. It’s not ethical. It’s not right in anyone’s universe. How dare he—?”

She sighed. “It isn’t like he really did rape you though, is it?”

“It’s just as real on the astral plane as it is in real life,” I snapped. She really didn’t believe in magic. And anyway, I had no idea if he did or not. I didn’t even know how you could tell.



## 2. Confrontation

He sat across from me, insipid oily hair slicked in waves across his head, scoffing his chicken and mushroom cream sauce. A dribble of white scum ran down his chin and he wiped it with a paper napkin. I averted my eyes and tried to stay in the moment. Why the hell had I agreed to a date the first time?

I had been waiting for a taxi outside the pub one night and because I was drunk I chatted with him. His internet dating story was a little bit woeful and I always give people the benefit of the doubt. The idea that 'you never know who will be the man of your dreams' would be the death of me if I let it. Indira was right. My next self-development goal would have to be to stop looking. Surely the man of my dreams would find me, not the other way around. I had to stop responding to every man who looked my way.

Half of my judgment problem was how broke I was. Tempting medical secretary wages didn't pay enough for regular steak. Turning down dates was hard because of how nice it felt to eat great food, drink wine and be the centre of someone's attention for a few hours. But if they were a loser, I was the loser.

The silence became awkward, as though he was waiting for me to speak.

"So where's this special white sage?" I blurted and took a slug of red wine as I realised how grabby that sounded. My mouth was never really connected with my brain.

He looked a little superior for a moment—it could have been the light—but his smile seemed apologetic. "I'm really sorry, it totally skipped my mind. I hope you weren't relying on it."

"Of course not." I plopped down the glass and picked up my knife and fork feeling stupid. I didn't even want the gift. Wasn't sure why I had to ask for it.

The silence continued. The chatty, super-polite man from previous dates seemed strangely absent. Maybe he suspected something.

"So tell me about your work some more," I prompted as I cut through a thick crispy rind of pearly fat. "What kind of thing does your charity do?"

He seemed so nondescript as he chewed his chicken al fungi. I couldn't see him working any kind of magic, but

people do surprise you.

He swallowed and took a swig of beer. “Some tribes on reservations want to make and sell their own produce. They weave baskets, make jewellery with silver and rocks from their own mines and rugs from the wool of their own sheep. We purchase equipment, help people get set up and find wholesalers and other buyers around the world so they can sell their products at a fair price. Help them build contacts, get them going, that kind of thing.”

His answer sounded familiar, like I’d read it in a textbook with white saviour overtones. It could have been word-for-word the same as he’d described it last time I asked. While I was still at university, I’d worked part time for a shop that specialised in Navajo silver and turquoise jewellery. I knew it was a thing. The owners traded directly with the Navajo nation, so they ‘did it right’. But his explanation still sounded a bit canned. Like he’d carefully researched the whole concept and said it hundreds of times before. Probably had, if it *was* his job.

“Have you ever done the whole sweat lodge thing when you visited the Navajo?”

He wheezed and coughed a bit of chicken onto his plate. God, he was gross.

“Sure, sure I have. My initiation ceremony into the clan was the greatest experience of my life. I think I nearly died.”

I took another bite of my steak, going for a casual

attitude. “So, do the Navajo go in for astral travel?”

Apparently intrigued, he put down his knife and fork. “What makes you ask that? Thought you weren’t really into magic.”

I pulled a face. “Thought you weren’t.” I dared to make eye contact for one defiant second, then dropped my gaze as my mouthful took more swallowing than anticipated. I washed it down with wine and self-consciously replaced the glass in front of me. “I like to try to understand the spiritual world. It’s interesting to learn how people in other cultures see things.” He didn’t have to know I was usually as blind as a bat on the astral plane.

He stared at me until I squirmed. “You shouldn’t dabble, Inayat. Do it full time or not at all.” The darkness of his pupils seemed to bleed into his watery blue eyes.

I sliced off a perfect piece of rare steak and regarded him, my wine glass perfectly centred between us, an ineffectual barrier. There were plenty of reasons why I didn’t do it...much.

“Astral travel is a skill used since prehistoric times by many peoples, not just Native Americans.” His toothy smile made me queasy, but he was right. Also about dabbling. I needed to get back into studying.

He paused, almost dramatically. “Had any revelations lately?”

Now there was a word. One I use quite specifically. I

must have told him I got spiritual revelations sometimes.

“I’m not sure you’d call it a revelation.” I gathered my thoughts. “But I realised you must be very interested in magic.” He could refute my statement if he wanted.

He shrugged. “Magic has been...Let’s just say, my saviour.” He stopped and took a bite of his dinner. I waited. Expectantly. The air hung with pointed tension. He hurriedly swallowed. “What?”

“How interested in magic are you, David?”

He put his knife and fork down, his face clouded. “There isn’t room in your belief system for my magic.”

Adrenaline boomed in my centre. His arrogant reply was at odds with his harmless appearance. Yet he’d played it like he knew nothing about magic when I’d mentioned a couple of past experiences. Like he was super open minded and interested, but didn’t know anything himself. Now I knew he’d been disingenuous.

I steeled myself and smiled insincerely. “Something weird happened to me this morning, wanna hear?”

His eyes narrowed as he shifted in his chair and he seemed somehow tougher, bigger and stronger. It dawned on me that I’d underestimated him, but I was here now. In for a penny, Inayat. I dove right in.

“This morning when I woke up, someone was lying on top of me, but I was totally alone.” His mouth hung slightly and

he was about to speak, so I panicked and rushed it. "I think it was you. You visited me."

He pushed himself back in his chair and looked at me intently. I held his gaze, but couldn't decipher his expression. Then he smiled, friendly creases at the sides of his eyes. He emanated admiration, a change so sudden that confusion touched me.

"You're so psychic," he said earnestly. "And you're *magnificent* when you're angry." His eyes shone and he leaned across the table with a wide grin. I lurched back out of his reach, openly angry now.

"You can't do things like that, it isn't ethical."

He sat back in his seat, his face frozen. "Ethical? What's ethical got to do with it?"

"Magic has to be ethical. Otherwise all you're going to do is bring hell down on your head."

He laughed unpleasantly. "Says who, Silver Ravenwolf?"

I flushed with embarrassment. The famous vampy American Wiccan might be the fluffiest kitten in witchcraft but it was her books that had first attracted me to magic as a teen. I couldn't remember telling him that. I shuddered at the thought he might have also tramped through my memories while he was fucking about in my head.

"What about the Rule of Three?" The main rule of Wicca was one to live by as far as karma was concerned. I tried to

flatten the tone of triumph in my voice as I registered his scornful expression. He looked like he was about to spit at me.

He lowered his voice. "The more you learn about magic, Inayat, the less you'll believe in the dogma." His light eyes seemed to darken, flat and soulless, like shark's eyes. "Get yourself educated better."

His patronising tone wound me up, though I didn't really know what he meant by dogma. As far as I knew if you used magic to do bad things to other people, it didn't go well. Never had for me and I'd never done anything bad deliberately, but sometimes it was hard to know your own intentions. Man, that had got me into some trouble. That was why I mostly didn't bother any more beyond the odd employment spell.

"What did you think you were going to get from creeping around in my space without me knowing?" I wanted him to say he'd come to rape me. Wanted him to admit to the violation, intruding on my spirit for something as base as sex.

He laughed, first quietly, then with his head thrown back, roaring so loudly that heads turned at the tables on either side of us. Embarrassment washed over me. I'd come here to make him feel small but instead it was me.

He leaned forwards, eyes never leaving mine, mesmerising in their stare. "What do you think I got from it, Inayat?"

I opened my mouth and crossed my fingers. "You'll

never get what you came for, so fuck you.”

Thin tendrils of black smoke wrapped themselves around him, foggy folds barely visible, as though his hate cloaked him. His lips turned upwards again, a loathing expression across his face.

“I always get what I come for, silly little bitch.”

I blinked, afraid again that he really had raped me. The vapours around him vanished, but the terror held me in place on my seat.

He tensed for a moment, staring off into the distance. For a moment I thought he'd blanked out. A blue-light siren approached the pub and passed it with the distinct pitch change. The sound faded into the distance and David's attention returned to me, speaking softly now.

“Duplicitous women, you all think yourselves so much better than you are. Not one of you alive that's as good as you think. Only takes a minute to rip your false face off you. And here I thought finally I'd found a woman worthy of my time. Fucking fool me.”

The blatant misogyny triggered my adrenaline.

“You must have a really shitty relationship with your mother if that's the way you think about women,” I shot back, a stab in the dark that shook me, but he blinked—a flinch—so fleeting I might have imagined it. A direct hit, no less.

“My mother,” he breathed. “My fucking mother.” He

wrinkled his nose like a scornful pig and looked down at the table for the briefest of moments, breaking the connection. Next moment, his eyes were glued to mine, a strange internal glow within.

“Think you can humiliate me?” He shook his head as though I was foolish beyond belief. “You want another visit? You want me to come to you every fucking night? I’ll chase you down in your dreams you little bitch and you’ll fuck me like you want it. You got nothing you can do about it.”

I stared at him, fear threatening to overcome my brain while I sorted through the possibilities. I didn’t know if he was really a vindictive person or if it was just talk. Didn’t know him well enough to tell. There was no way out of this situation that could be peaceful. I’d driven it to this. Driven him to hating me even more. Passed the point of bringing it down to lighten it. He braced his hand on the table to stand. I had seconds to do something. Anything. I might as well deserve the persecution. Give him a solid humiliation to hate me for.

“Fuck you, man.” I picked up his uneaten dinner and dumped the plate upside down in his lap. It slipped onto the floor with a bang. A few thick lumps of chicken clung to his trousers on their way to the floor, leaving trails of creamy greyish sauce. Not a good look for any man in a public place.

He shoved his chair backwards so hard the rear legs caught on the stone flag floor and tipped him over. His head

cracked on the balustrade behind, but he up-righted himself awkwardly.

I grabbed my jacket from the back of the dining chair and shrugged it on.

“Stay away from me, David,” I warned him. “Or I will call the police.”

Rage filled, he kicked his empty plate across the floor with a clatter and pushed past me too closely, too aggressive, too near. He glowered at me with an evil that ignited another explosion in my belly and I tried to keep the fear out of my eyes as it burned me from the inside out.

He stamped to the gents and I grabbed my handbag, stalking to the bar with as much dignity as I could muster to order a glass of wine, hands shaking as I fumbled cash from my purse. An abandoned *Evening Post* on the bar scrunched under my hands I scrambled onto the stool. Its headline blared at me: *Paediatrician Vanished Near Canal*. I plonked my bag on top of it, a woman’s beautiful smile sticking out from underneath it. I pushed it out of the way.

“Are you okay?” the bar girl asked. “We saw what happened.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, close to tears as adrenaline pumped the blood round my head. Thank God I was away from him. “I’m so sorry for making such a mess. He scared me.” I handed her a tenner and she gently grasped my hand as well as the money.

The firm, supportive touch brought a sting of tears to my eyes and I blinked them back.

She shook her head and popped open the cash register. “As long as you’re okay. Do you want a taxi? I can call one.”

Tears threatened to well up again. She was being too nice. I needed to snap out of it, not blub myself into an expensive and unnecessary taxi.

“No, it’s okay. Do you mind if I just sit at the bar for a while?” I didn’t have enough in the bank for random taxi rides and home was only fifteen minutes walk around the edge of Roundhay Park.

“Sure.”

She handed me my change and we both looked around as the door to the men’s toilet swung shut with a bang. David walked across the floor to the vacated table and called for the bill to a nearby waiter. The front of his trousers and shirt were stained light. My heart thumped with a rush of adrenaline and I turned back to the bar reflexively. I nervously sipped my no-strings wine.

Through the mirror on the opposite wall of the bar, I watched him leave with no glance back. My heart steadied towards its normal rate. Someone sat in the stool next to me and ordered two mojito cocktails.

“Hello,” said a friendly female voice to my right. A pair of merry brown eyes looked down at me, framed by a shock of

brown curls and a smiling face.

I couldn't help but smile. "Hi. How are you doing?" A skinny lady, possibly in her late forties, with a three-quarter-length winter coat and a large floral handbag on her lap.

She nodded. "Would you like a little drink with me? Can't let a girl drink on her own." She passed me a mojito without waiting for an answer. Not that I was given to turning down free drinks.

"My name's Molly Blue and yours is something pretty unusual, isn't it?"

That got me. Today had been weird enough.

"Inayat Tate. How do you know me, please?" I took a sip of sweet minty cocktail.

She shook her head and drank some mojito through a straw.

"I don't know you, but I've been brought to find you and it's important you listen to me."

I blinked. She didn't sound bossy, but she was firm. Her features turned serious. "That man you were seeing, he's not very nice, is he?"

I stilled the panic and went with the moment. Everything happens for a reason. I shook my head and picked up my straw from the bar.

"He basically tried to assault me. Secretly, if you know what I mean?" I imbibed delicious mojito, its green freshness

waking up my mouth.

“I know what you mean.” Our gaze held. She conveyed a message of knowing more than what the words had exchanged. “He isn’t going to let it lie, you know. You’ll have to be careful.”

“How do you know?”

She smiled and dropped her eyes. “Let’s just say I know, okay?” They flickered back up to me and then she gazed over my shoulder distantly. “You’re going to have to listen to me,” she repeated. I noticed the kindness of her eyes against her stern expression.

“I’ve been heavily pressed by at least a couple of your ancestors to get myself up to this pub and get you out safely.” She lowered her voice. “I’m in my PJs under my coat!” She shifted her long winter coat to one side, revealing a leg swathed in white fabric with a Cath Kidston pattern. “There’s a man wearing a turban and he’s got an army of soldiers, all in turbans and white skirts and they’ve all got scimitars. That’s your grandfather, right? Angry guy, but not with me, wants me to help.”

I pushed the confusion out of the way. “My great-grandfather, maybe. Not my grandfather.” I didn’t know my family much anyway, my heritage hadn’t been a big part of my upbringing. Whoever the hell this woman was, she seemed to know more than me.

She shook her head tiredly. “He won’t leave me alone,

just stands in front of me every way I turn, his army crammed into my house and all around the outside. When I went out with the dog, they filled the street! And there's a woman in a pinny with a rolling pin. Been hanging around for days, but tonight they made me get a bloody expensive taxi all the way over here from Seacroft. I've never seen owt like it."

I drank my mojito all the way down to the noisy ice and thoughtfully sucked up the dregs. Was she making it up? How could a stranger know about my ancestry? She seemed genuine, but could be off her head. Looking closer, she didn't seem like someone on drugs. Possibly ill? She stared at me till I sheepishly stopped with the ice-sucking racket.

"What's going on?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

"We're going to get a taxi back to yours. My bet is he's going to try and get you as you cross the park, so we'll drive back instead. All I've got to do is see you home safe."

There were plenty of dark shadows around Gledhow Hall. Places for someone bad to hide and spy.

Molly twinkled. "I do know how bonkers this sounds. I suppose the question might be—do you feel safe with me?"

I smiled. Surprisingly, I did.

"Let's get going, then." She zipped up her handbag and got off the stool.

We left the pub and, as if by magic, a taxi rolled up.

Molly winked. "Just when you need it. But if you're

waiting for a bus in the pissing rain...nothing, every time.”

We got in the back, told the driver where to take us and five minutes later, pulled up to the gate.

“Can you drive right up to the door please?” I asked.

The driver grumbled. “It’s awkward round the back there in the dark, no room to turn. You’ve only got to walk fifty yards.” His dismissive tone was impenetrable.

I shut up—too annoyed to speak—and shot Molly a glance. She paid him and we got out each side of the cab and let him drive away.

Molly looked distracted. “He’s here. Let’s go!”

I dug in my handbag for my keys as we ran up the drive to the large Yorkshire stone porch. Molly dropped behind quite quickly but my panic kept me going. I couldn’t remember if Indira was working or not and the light was out in the porch, which was odd.

I entered the porch still at a run, stuck the key in the lock and—

“Hi Inayat.”

My shock reflex yanked the key back out of the lock and I dropped the bunch on the floor. I turned slowly towards the familiar voice. David stepped out of the shadows and advanced on the porch steps. I was trapped.

He smiled. “I wanted to say I’m sorry I visited you. I didn’t realise how you’d take it.”

He didn't *look* scary, but given the level of hate he'd just shown me, no way did this feel safe.

"I took it just fine, thanks, David." I furtively eyed the keys a little distance to my right. "You need to leave now."

He was on the step, still smiling crookedly, moving slowly towards me. I backed up a little. Where was Molly? She can't have been far behind. I resisted the urge to look for her, didn't want him to know she was there yet.

He scowled now, his face impossibly mobile, as though he was made of plasticine. He seemed to morph into a cartoon version of himself. I blinked, but he didn't come back into focus properly. The black smoke was around him again, thicker now.

He kicked the dust. "I'm sorry, okay? It was wrong. I'm not a bad person, you know? Just get a bit carried away sometimes."

Here was my chance to make peace. Play nice to stop him hounding me in my sleep. I held my breath for a long moment until the blood pounded in my ears.

"Okay, well, I'm sorry that I wasn't what you thought I was. I just wanted to get to know you." I floundered, searching for the right words as they evaded me. "I didn't think I was being duplicitous." He narrowed his eyes. Using his words was the wrong move. I needed to finish the conversation and get away from him. "I just don't know how to get to know someone if I'm not spending time with them."

I crouched down for the keys, but as I came back up, he grabbed me hard around the waist and threw his weight into me. I landed heavily on my hands and knees.

The door opened in front of us illuminating the ground in the hall light and someone screamed. A yelp behind me heralded a thud and David's body landed next to me, his head stoved in with a rockery stone that bounced on the porch to lie beside him.



### 3. The Police

Molly and I stared at each other in horror as I clambered to my feet. Indira stepped out of the doorway, a tiny figure with her hand over her mouth.

“Is he dead?” she whispered.

I knelt and put the back of my hand to his open mouth. His head wasn’t completely smashed in, but the nasty gash on the crown had done its job. He had broken some teeth as he went down, a few crumbled white pieces lay around his face and I was careful not to touch him. A shallow, moist breath touched my hand and my stomach turned. I leapt to my feet.

“He’s alive, what are we going to do?”

Molly closed her eyes for a long moment. “Call an ambulance.”

“Oh my God, babe, how did it get to this?” Indira turned

towards Molly. "Who are you?"

"Call an ambulance," Molly said. "Can you call nine-nine-nine? Have you got a phone?"

Indira stopped short and stared at her, eyes wide. "Yeah, inside, I'll call them." She turned and dashed into the house.

"What are you doing?" I whispered to Molly. "What are we going to do?" Faced with a grim police officer, I didn't have much hope for my brain to connect with my mouth. I was the shittiest liar I knew. I couldn't coordinate my tongue with what passed for considered thought at the best of times. I didn't have it in me, not feeling like this.

Molly must have seen the terror in my face.

"We need the police as well," she told me in a normal voice. She was very straightforward, down to earth. "We're fine. Just tell them everything. The visitation, everything. Tell them you're into witchcraft and pagan stuff. They won't section you. You've got witnesses in the pub for your story."

I had a sense I was falling. "Me? But you hit him. You can't put that on me." She was a complete stranger and she'd nearly killed the guy and now she was dumping it all on me.

She smiled, but her eyes filled. "I'd never do anything to you like that." She sniffed and blinked, dashing away the two tears that ran down her face. "You tell them the truth and I'll tell them the truth and because it's the truth, we'll be fine."

I was scared. "They're going to say it was my fault. I

shouldn't have gone out with him when I wasn't going to sleep with him. I don't want them to say it was me, it's going to be us in court, not him."

She stepped forward and rubbed my shoulder. "It's going to be okay, don't worry about it." She smiled encouragingly, didn't seem worried at all. I looked into her eyes for a long moment, but she had nothing but reassurance for me. I couldn't believe her. My foolish actions surrounded me, acting out my flirtatious laugh and the way I thought up new things to entertain him. And all the time I had no intention of sleeping with him.

Indira came out of the flat, talking on the phone.

"I don't know, he's unconscious, I've no idea who he is." She advanced on me, making meaningful faces at me as she spoke. "Hold on, I'll give you to someone who knows what's going on." She covered the receiver with her hand. "It's the ambulance people, they asked if you want the police."

I took the phone and stepped past David's prone body, wandering down the drive a little way away from the lit scene outside the porch. The tears were coming, like an overwhelming tidal wave of fear and shock, but I had to do this call.

I steadied myself. "Hi, what do you need to know?"

"What's your name?" The operator's voice was calm, almost disinterested.

"Inayat Tate."

“What happened, Inayat?”

My stomach spasmed as I remembered the feeling as he grabbed me. I couldn't speak, too busy holding down the freak-out. I took a long, slow breath, gradually let the oxygen back into my body.

“A man tried to attack me and we've knocked him out with a rock.”

The voice at the other end exuded common sense. “There's an ambulance on the way right now. Do you know the name of the man?”

“David.”

“Do you know his surname?”

I couldn't remember. Something weird.

“Okay, we're going to patch you to Police Headquarters. I'm going to put you on hold, okay?”

I waited through the beeps, looking towards the entrance of the drive. Some kind of fabric billowed in the wind behind one of the stone gateposts. I squinted, but couldn't make it out. A police operator interrupted me on the line. “We have your address, there's a patrol car on its way. Just sit tight and wait for them.”

I ended the call and walked slowly back up the drive to the porch, the rippling fabric forgotten.

Indira leaned against the porch door, chatting to Molly. They both seemed oblivious to the body on the ground. I hoped

he hadn't died. That might complicate things. I didn't dare look. I went indoors to get a blanket to put over him and when I came back the ambulance had arrived.



Sergeant O'Brien led me around the side of the house, notebook out and pen poised. He didn't seem the overly sympathetic type, but I had in my mind the things to say. Stick to the truth, just not all of it.

The blue lights on the ambulance lit unusual parts of the rockery and drive, backlighting the policeman who towered over me in silhouette. He guided me to sit on the stone windowsill of our living room, the dim light within casting a tiny glimmer on his face compared to the flashing blues. I stayed silent. My ability to incriminate myself was far greater with a flapping mouth.

"So, do you know the injured party?" he asked, scrutinising my face. I stared back, but tried to look glum not defiant.

"He took me out for dinner tonight." I tried not to think about the other two times.

"Didn't go well?" he guessed.

"It went like shit. I didn't want to go out with him again. He threatened me, said he was going to follow me until I did." My whole body shook as I lied. It sounded flaky as fuck.

“Follow you. Like stalk you?” His voice was cynical, as though he didn’t believe me. It panicked me because already I wasn’t using the right words. I hated lying. Never thought I’d ever try it with the police. I reminded myself that it technically wasn’t a lie. But it was. I sensed all chance for a normal life disappearing into the distance as thoughts of prison loomed in the darkness. I could get done for perverting the course of justice.

“I dumped his dinner in his lap when he said that.”

“So you escalated the situation?” He didn’t quite roll his eyes, but his tone said it anyway.

I squirmed but said nothing. Obviously I knew at the time that chucking food over him was going to anger him even more, but the policeman pointing this out wasn’t helpful. I was right not to mention the previous dates.

“So he threatened to stalk you, you threw his dinner over him, and then he turned up at your home when you got back?”

I nodded wanly and picked the skin on my thumb till it bled.

“With your friend? Did you meet your friend in the pub with him?”

I shook my head, wondering suddenly how to explain Molly’s mysterious appearance, given her talk about my ancestors. “I don’t know her. She was just there already, think she saw everything that happened. She offered to come home

with me to make sure I was safe.”

I glanced around for Molly and could see her talking animatedly to the other police officer. His face was totally stoic as though he was made of rock. The living room light went on in the flat behind me. Indira must have been sent back inside already.

O'Brien looked up from his notes with a frown. “Interesting. You weren't safe. Do you think she knows him?”

I shook my head. “She didn't say she did.”

He made another note. “So what happened after the pub exactly?”

Now his tone sounded flatter, more cynical, as though the fact I didn't really know Molly played into the implication that I hadn't told him everything. Which I hadn't, but he couldn't know that. I was reading too much into everything.

I took a calming breath and tried to curb the panic. “We got a taxi back here and he was waiting for me. He gave me a fright and I dropped my keys. He apologised for the things he said, but when I picked up my keys he grabbed me from behind and threw me onto the ground. Molly hit him with a rock and he fell next to me.”

O'Brien made more notes. “How was Molly able to come on him like that?”

“I was scared when we arrived. I ran up the drive when I got out of the car but she didn't run.”

“You were scared but she wasn’t?”

“I don’t know.”

“And he’d already grabbed you when she hit him?”

I nodded wordlessly. She’d saved my life. And asked me to tell the truth. And I hadn’t. The lump in my throat choked me.

“Got any injuries?”

My knees felt sore. I bent down and rolled up my left jeans leg. A scrape and a developing bruise on my knee was the only evidence. He made a note.

“Any other witnesses?”

I looked at him in shock. David’s word against mine and all I had were friends as witnesses.

His face was unreadable. Not disinterested, but maybe disbelieving. “Your flatmate? Anyone at all?”

I didn’t know what Indira had seen. She’d opened the door when I was still on my knees. Maybe she’d just seen David on the ground with his head bashed in.

I slumped and shook my head, tears washing my face. “You’ll have to ask Indira. I don’t know what she saw.”

O’Brien closed his notebook with a snap. “Stay there.” The order rooted me to the spot. He walked back to the doorway and had a quiet word with the other officer. I saw him nod and he returned quickly.

“You’re in luck,” he said sourly. “Your flatmate says she opened the door to see him throw you to the ground and that’s

when your new friend hit him over the head. Convenient.”

I glanced up at him but his face was still closed to me. It *was* too convenient. Sounded like we’d concocted it all.

“We’ll see what the—man—says.” He shot a look at me, as though he could see right through me. “But given the only witnesses are all known to each other to some degree, you’re not significantly hurt and it’s his word against yours, Crown Prosecution likely won’t bother pressing charges.”

If they knew I’d led him on they might.

“He jumped on me as I picked up my keys and threatened me in the pub,” I repeated. “There was a dark-haired woman behind the bar, she saw everything.”

O’Brien was unmoved. “There’s a lot worse going on in the city lately. I’ll be talking to the staff at the pub if he wants to press charges, but not until then.”

I was struggling to get the information into my head. “So you’re not going to arrest Molly?”

He sighed and closed his pocket book. “Not sure how this works, are you? Look, CPS only like cases they can win, but if there isn’t the evidence, they won’t bother a judge. After I’ve interviewed your would-be assailant, we’ll be able to take a clearer view on the situation, but there’s enough to do around here at the moment. We’re not about to add to the load by dragging your friend into the station until we’ve got a full picture.” He looked across to the porch area, bored already. “If he

wants to press charges, we'll see about witnesses at the Fox regarding your altercation. If their story matches up with yours, CPS will throw it out."

The only altercation anyone had seen was me reacting aggressively towards him. I didn't even know why I'd encouraged him to talk to the bar staff.

"What happens if their story doesn't match up?" I just wanted to hide and never see anyone ever again.

His stare pierced my skull this time, gave me a headache. "Why wouldn't it match up?"

"It was a private conversation, they might not know what was said."

He sighed. "Wait for us to let you know what we establish. You and your friend will be hearing from us if it looks as though you're going to be charged with assault. I can't see it happening. Even if he does, from what the witnesses have said so far, defence of another will probably ride."

The ambulance left with a crunch of tyres on the drive and the blue lights with it. Left in darkness with only the living room illuminating us, O'Brien closed his pocket book with a snap. "If you've got nothing else to add, we can head back over there." Around the corner of the house, Molly and the ambulance had vanished and O'Brien's partner was examining the porch light with his torch.

"Probably smashed it with a rock," he told us, gesturing

with two plastic bags. “Your pal’s inside.” He bent down and collected the rockery stone. “Surprising how strong someone can be in stressful situations. She made a big mess of him.”

He handed it to O’Brien who turned it over in his hands, weighing it. “We’ll talk to the gentleman as soon as he’s in a fit state,” he said. “You ladies try not to skip town, okay?”

As they drove away, I paused in the quiet darkness of the porch. Gledhow Hall had been around since the 1760s. Its history was full of important people and a lot of splendour, as well as being a hospital during World War One. It felt like ghosts, but I never saw one. I never saw anything on the astral plane, no ghosts, no spirits, no nothing, no matter how many hours of meditation I put away. The house walls hadn’t been sandblasted, so its industrial black coating of two hundred years of pollution gave it a brooding atmosphere.

Outside was dark and damp. Winter was endless and unrelenting in the city. You never got to see real greenery.

From the side of my eyes, I caught something light tucked behind the drainpipe at its base. I walked over to it and pulled it out. A set of keys and a wallet. I flicked through the wallet. David’s face stared out from his driving license, his eyes watching me. I slammed it shut and dashed through the hall into the flat.

“Look what I found.”

“Where’d you find those?” Molly was instantly

suspicious. Unusually for me, I could read her face like I knew her well.

“Outside, behind the drain.”

She frowned “On the floor?”

I shook my head. “Tucked behind the downpipe.”

She scowled so hard I thought she was mad with me. I thought of what she’d said about telling the truth, but kept it to myself for now.

I handed her the wallet and she opened it up, peering at his image on his license. “It’s not like he just dropped it, is it?”

It wasn’t. He’d deliberately tucked it away behind the pipe. He’d planned all along to attack me.

“Get it handed in, love, best if the police have it.” She narrowed her eyes as she turned it over. “Don’t want any kind of connection left with him, nothing—” She broke off and looked up brightly as she passed it back over. “Do you want my telephone number? We should meet for a coffee in a day or two.”

I knew I should admit to her that I didn’t tell the truth. I owed it to her if nothing else. But I didn’t know how to say it. It might be best if I never saw her again. She waited expectantly.

I looked over at Indira. “Have you got a pen?” She waved her iPhone at me. “I’ll text it you.”

I never knew where the bloody thing was, could never find it when I wanted it and usually discovered it was out of battery long before I thought to charge it. I heard no beep as she

texted me, so it probably wasn't in the room.

The taxi arrived for Molly and we said goodbye at the porch. Indira turned and went straight back in, but I paused in the doorway. The darkness was powerful, but as ever I felt blind, hemmed in by city walls and the night. Only a breeze stirred a few leaves. Even out here in the suburbs, in the grounds of a stately home that had gradually suffered the encroachment of residential estates, it wasn't enough. I shut the heavy door securely and returned to the flat.

"Nice policeman. Lucky you're white or you'd both have been arrested. You should have seen the way the other one looked at me until I said I lived here. Drink your tea." Indira pushed a mug of steaming liquid towards me. "I've got the early shift in the morning, I'm going to be knackered. What are you going to do now?"

I looked at the clock. Half-past midnight. "Bed. I'll take the wallet and keys to the police station in my lunch break." I left them right in the middle of the breakfast bar so I couldn't miss them in the morning. I certainly didn't want to have anything that belonged to him. Way too much of a link, given his apparent magical abilities.

I drank my tea and attempted to sleep.



## 4. Enter Caleb

I woke with my alarm, but lay in the darkness with my eyes open. Who knew what David had tried to do to me two nights ago? Hopefully he wouldn't remember anything about last night. A crack on the head like that was enough to finish anyone's short-term memory.

I wanted to phone Molly today, needed to understand what had happened to us, but would leave it until I got home from work. I toyed with the fear of admitting to her that I lied, but figured it was better to tell her anyway. The priority was to get his belongings out of my possession. I didn't want anything of his in my home. Apart from anything else, I didn't know what other magical stuff he was capable of when he recovered from the life-threatening injuries. I had the impression that the Navajo sweat lodge wasn't his only magic-related endeavour,

though who knew where I'd got that from.

There was so much more to him than he had shown me. None of it good, from what I could tell.

Leah popped into my head again. Man, I missed her regular company. Some sensible go-getting advice was what I needed right now, but we hadn't been out together for a while. I figured she'd call when she was ready. Sometimes I didn't know if it was okay to chase for her company or not. Friends could be confusing sometimes and I didn't like to push myself on people. We usually went through phases anyway. A brief pang of loneliness stung me but I pushed it away. We hadn't fallen out, so there was that.

I dropped back to sleep.

It wasn't until I sat on the bus—chest heaving at the effort to get to it in time—that I realised I'd left the bloody keys and wallet at home. As the bus chugged and heaved away from the roadside, I thought about how David had taken the items out of his pocket and hidden them behind the drain.

His 'apology' was a way of getting close enough to grab me.

A tiny, paranoid part of me wondered—like Molly—if the wallet and keys were some kind of ruse— a trick to leave a connection between us—but logical me wouldn't let the idea pervade. A gift, like the promised sage, perhaps. His ID and house keys? Not so likely.

I would check through his wallet a little more carefully when I got home. Missing something obvious when it was in my unsupervised possession would be unforgivable. No coincidences. If I was 'supposed' to hold on to it a bit longer, the reason would pop up eventually.



Indira made spaghetti bolognese for dinner and true to her usual style, heaved a mountain of food on my plate.

“Aw, you don’t have to put so much on my plate, you always make loads!”

She shoved the meal across to me, pushing David’s belongings to the side of the counter out of the way.

“You’ve got to eat properly babe.” She smiled as she looked into the massive cooking pot. “You could be right though. I’ll stick the rest in the freezer, or we’ll be eating bolognese for the next fortnight.”

She was a feeder for sure, a bistro chef at work, making intricate delicious morsels for death-defying prices, but a comfort food addict at home and I was a greedy sod. I couldn’t leave anything on my plate.

I could see another pot simmering gently on the stove. “What’s in there? Another meal?” I carried my meal over to the dining table.

She smiled in a self-satisfied way. “It’s chicken stock,

babe. Can't waste anything, you know that." We'd had roast chicken a couple of days before.

I shook my head inwardly at her food obsession. She was worse than me by a long way. Had made a career of it.

Mind you, she was the sensible 'normal' one. She didn't care about relationships, all she wanted was to run her own kitchen.

As I munched through slick spaghetti and rich meaty sauce, I tuned out Indira's chatting. I didn't know how safe I felt any more.

My phone buzzed in my bag and I got it out. I never knew if it would have enough battery for me to see the message in time.

*Gona catch up w/you soon.*

My breath caught in the back of my throat and scraped across my vocal chords. I didn't recognise the number. I noticed a missed call and swiped the screen. A private number. Fear melted into my belly acid.

Indira stopped in mid-flow, her voice tight with suspension. "What does it say?"

The doorbell rang.

I swallowed. "Are you expecting someone?" It rang again.

She shook her head, eyes terrified and excited all at once. "Do you think it's the police come to save you a journey with the keys and stuff? What did the message say?"

The bell went off again, repeatedly, like it was now stuck.

“It says someone’s going to catch up with me.”

“Who?” Indira’s voice cracked with strain.

I wished we didn’t live in the flat right next to the front door of the building. It was too easy to see when we were in or out.

“I don’t know the number.” The doorbell stuttered and stopped for a moment. Sergeant O’Brien could be checking up on us. Or come to arrest me. I put my fork down and got up, reluctantly walking towards the flat entrance. Footsteps rattled past, leaving the front porch and ran up the stairs. Maggie lived above us, an artist who exhibited in London and Paris. She’d shown us around her flat one time, sculptures and installations that I didn’t understand at all. I hoped the visitor was for her. The massive iron-studded door closed with a thick clunk. I listened, but heard only my own breath.

I slid the chain off as quietly as possible and unlocked the catch. The click was deafening to my ears. I opened the door a crack and then a little wider. The murky hallway was empty—

—*Shit!* My view was blocked by a familiar and unwelcome figure, who stepped into the space and shoved his foot against the door.

“Caleb, what are you doing here?” His customary studded jacket had gone. Now he wore a long overcoat, but nothing else had changed. His tousled dark hair had receded a

little, but his skin was as pasty as ever.

He twisted his face up in a miserable expression. “She’s left me, hasn’t she? Why did she leave me? Why did she do that to me?”

“You aren’t serious. Why would I care?” My scorn leaked through my teeth like tallow from an old-style candle.

He stared at me, piercing blue eyes through dark eyelashes, swaying gently on his feet.

All the wasted time rolled in on me. Months and months of stupidity—almost a year—and two years of picking myself up and falling down again. Of trying to live straight—to be normal—and continually getting it wrong. People aren’t so easy to judge when you don’t trust your own judgment on anything and sometimes life feels like a series of lessons. Like, right now. If he thought he was coming round here to get sympathy from me, he was crazy.

The pain of wanting him had gone, but betrayal lingers far longer.

“I know you understand, Inayat, thought you’d help me.” His broad Yorkshire drawl was as lazy as ever.

I tried to shut the door, but his foot didn’t budge an inch. I glowered at him. “You don’t fucking think, do you?”

I had met Caleb a week after I’d created my first ever love spell. Again, not exactly a coincidence. I asked for my soul mate, but I suspect that little phrase doesn’t mean what I used to

think. I didn't know it would bind me to an unknown man of chaotic tendencies and dubious intentions. I know now. I've never cast another love spell since.

And now he stood there lazily, looking at me like some kind of quiet blast from the past. Someone I knew intimately, whose mind I knew even better. Whose soul I was apparently irrevocably attached to. Whom I had to live without because he didn't actually want to be with me.

At my current stage of understanding, the spirit isn't the same as the soul. Your soul is maybe a thousand times bigger than you, a larger unit that encompasses lots of spirits. Your soul mate is another spirit from the same soul. Possibly. My view on the universe is a little cluttered and I viewed soul mates differently back then. I used to think they were the person with whom you are destined to spend precious time in each incarnation.

Turned out it didn't matter what my understanding was, the Universe's interpretation is final.

My main takeaway was that you can't guarantee meeting your soul mate will be the best experience. Over two years later, here he is, weeping about how someone else left him.

"She took my ring. My gran's," he moaned.

I gave up in exasperation. He wasn't going away, probably wanted something. I couldn't do anything about his foot in the door.

“For God’s sake, come in, you’re making the place look shabby.”

He entered the flat and brightened a little as his calculating look around the room revealed the gorgeous Indira.

“Witty woo, how do you do.” She’d left her dinner on the table and stood questioningly in the middle of the spacious living room. He grabbed her hand and pressed it to his lips.

She tugged it back, giving me a hard-Indira look. She smiled at him, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“Who are you?”

“Indira, this is Caleb. He’s probably just leaving.”

“Shuddup, Scary.” He winked at Indira and cunning crossed her face, replaced instantly with wide-eyed openness.

Her tone was matter of fact. “I don’t believe I’ve ever heard about you, Caleb.” She smiled wickedly. “I tell you what, let’s have a coffee and a piece of cake and then you should probably leave.” She busied herself with the kettle.

“So where in Inayat’s life have you come from?”

Damn it, she was a nosy bugger. I hadn’t known Indira yet when I was in the throes of love and heartache for this fool and I just hadn’t talked to her about it. Too much pain and humiliation to reintroduce into my life. And now the dickhead was here in person.

“I’m a warlock,” he confided, untruthfully, as far as I knew. “Little witch can’t get enough of me.”

“Caleb, shut the fuck up.” I marched across the room to the dining table as my phone’s screen lit up with another message from the mysterious number. I picked it up. “We’ve had enough of stupid men this week and the last one ended up half dead, so you won’t stand much of a chance.”

I held my breath and opened the text.

*Ima get my shit together, feel bad I  
haven't seen you.*

That seemed more friendly. Could be Leah on a new number. I texted back.

*Who's you?*

I headed back to the kitchen bar, phone in hand and dropped it into my open handbag near the wall.

Caleb coughed like he had the plague and pulled up a seat at the bar. “What happened?” He wiped his eyes and took the proffered coffee and cake while we told him the story.

“The wanker left his wallet behind, so I’ve got to traipse all the way down to the police station with it,” I complained and immediately realised my mistake. Caleb’s eyebrows shot into his hairline.

“This wallet?” His never still fingers hefted the wallet straight away, fingering its pockets looking for money.

“And his keys,” blurted Indira, to my horror. I scowled meaningfully at her, but it was too late. Caleb didn’t seem to pick up on it, though.

“Is that right?” He spoke absently as he peered at the guy’s driving license. “Looks like a twat.”

I watched him closely, sliding my hand towards the bunch of keys as slowly as I could, the better to do it without him noticing. Just as my fingers almost touched the keys, he shoved the wallet and license into my stuck out hand.

He hooked up the keys and examined each one in the light. I tried not to look as desperate as I felt, but kept my eyes on his hands at all times. His ability to lift something right in front of the owner was legendary. Everything I knew about sleight of hand I’d learned from him.

To my surprise, he threw them back down on the counter with no discernable trick—which wasn’t to say he hadn’t. Still worried he might be more interested in them if I made a fuss, I didn’t make a move towards them yet.

Indira, apparently unaware of my stress, slid out of her seat. “Back in a minute.” She headed into her bedroom, presumably to use the bathroom.

“Are you leaving yet, Caleb?” I asked as she crossed the floor. No point in pretending I was comfortable in his presence. He knew I wasn’t and I still didn’t really know why he was here. “What did you really come here for?” Indira’s bedroom door closed with a click.

I felt weird—heady—as though I was under attack. So much time had passed since all that hoo-ha. My need for his love

had taken over my brain for so long that when I forced myself to move on, everything normal felt unfamiliar. And now, here he was, large as life, toxic and unwelcome in my life and home and still here after half an hour. I'd already had my space invaded twice in the past two days—and now Caleb? The pattern, if it was one, bothered me.

“Olivia left me.” He looked forlorn again.

I narrowed my eyes. He was pretending. “And she took your Gran’s ring.” Some vintage Art Deco monstrosity. I tried not to smile. I hoped she’d sold it already. “It was a gift, Caleb. You gave her a gift, so you don’t get it back.” It was easier to be twatty than to empathise.

No-one empathised with me when Caleb regularly turned up at my home all hours, raised my hopes they would split, then dodged me for six months after a massive fall out while I obsessed and thought about him nightly, locked in my flat with a spliff and my diary. I cringed. That six months had ended with a visit from Olivia herself, the only girlfriend he’d ever had who wasn’t into witchcraft, as far as I knew. Her spell was apparently stronger than anyone else’s.

He stood up and went to the sink to wash out his cup. I grabbed the keys while his back was turned and dropped them into my handbag with a clink.

“How did you track me down?” I didn’t know anyone from those days any more.

“Just asked around. Does it matter?”

“It matters. *Why* did you track me down, Caleb? Not just to moan about Olivia, surely?” I was surprised she’d only just ditched him, given the trauma he’d put her through.

He returned to the counter but didn’t sit down, just leant on it, as large and charismatic as ever.

“I want my ring back. You can get it back.”

The bloody ring. He was the worst of his star sign, a Leo, like Indira. But not at all like Indira. What’s his was his, even if he’d previously gifted it, I always knew that. It was understandable to an extent. Cash and his few possessions were the only security he’d ever had.

I stared at him for a long moment, wondering what he had in mind. “How the hell am I going to do that?”

No way would I face Olivia for him. I thought of her standing on my doorstep shrieking at me, her eyes, nose, and mouth red and blotchy from crying. I remembered being surprised when she ripped at her own hair, I hadn’t known people really did that. She deflected all her wrath that she’d saved for Caleb on to me, even if I did indirectly deserve some of it. Everything in their lives had started to drop apart. All a direct result of Caleb’s drug-fuelled, jacked-up behaviour, but my big mouth and his raving about magical attack had convinced her I was more terrifying than Satan. I’d never seen her since. The thought of even passing her in the street shot me full of fight-or-

flight.

The stock pot on the hob behind him bubbled louder. I peered around him just in time to see it boil over, a steaming, sizzling mess all over the cooker.

“Shit!” I ran right around the breakfast bar to the hob, pushing him out of the way as he turned to look. He moved towards the wall to give me space as I turned off the ring and grabbed a couple of tea towels. Stock and bits of crap everywhere. All I did was slop it around the surface. Viscous fluid and herbs coated the front of the cupboard below, splattering onto my shoes.

“For fuck’s sake, Indira!” I yelled.

Indira came out of her bedroom at a trot.

“What happened? What a mess!” She grabbed a towel and cleaned up more expertly than me. “Can’t even leave you long enough to go to the loo,” she chided.

Excitement over, I wished that Caleb would just leave. I turned to him to tell him that, but he tilted his head on one side, cajoling me to play his game, leaning against the wall as laconic as ever.

“You’re a good witch, Indus girl. Just get it for me, Inayat. Pretty please.” His blue eyes glinted through his exaggerated squint. I couldn’t find the words and for one treacherous moment didn’t know whether to be pleased he thought that, or angry he continued to use me.

Angry. Indus girl. He used to call me that when we were together, as though we'd spent a life together in the Indus Valley civilisation. Screw him.

"Get the fuck out, Caleb. I don't think I'm going to do you a favour any time soon, do you?" I didn't even know if I could magically retrieve his ring for him. I'd never tried. These days I normally just called up an angel to help me out when I remembered to ask.

I stamped to the hallway and switched on the light. He didn't move from his position at the breakfast bar. "Go."

He advanced on me slowly, but pushed past without shoving, looking at the pictures on the wall as he went. He kept glancing back, smirking. When he got to the door, he turned and nodded at me. Then he was gone. A moment later, the flat door slammed and finally a heavier slide-and-clunk as he exited the building.

Indira and I looked at each other. She shook her head disapprovingly. "What a bloody mess. I don't know why the pot boiled over," she said. I didn't know either.

I sat back down to my now cold meal and picked up my fork. My eye fell on my handbag at the other end of the breakfast bar. No longer snug against the wall, it stuck out at an angle as if it had been moved.

Or rifled through.

Adrenaline boomed in my centre. I almost tipped the

stool over as I scrambled to get to it. To my relief, I pulled out the bunch of keys. He hadn't taken them. I didn't know how many were on the fob in the first place but they seemed intact.

Indira followed my actions but said nothing. She handed me a plastic sack and I scooped up the wallet and popped it inside with the keys. Everything went back in my handbag.

No forgetting anything in the morning.

Indira and I finished up our cooled but still tasty meals and relaxed into our evening in front of the television. Or at least, she relaxed. My whole system had been shaken, emotionally rocked to the core as though some kind of magic just happened. My mind kept auto-replaying the stock pot boiling over and the handbag's new position. I'd missed something. The mysterious texter bothered me too. They hadn't replied, so I presumed it wasn't Leah.

I don't believe in Fate, but I do believe in intersections. We're all on our own life tracks, within our personal spheres. When our paths cross, the events that spin off from these are life changing. Working magic has the same effect, but often more intense—one reason why I don't do it much.

Caleb's appearance felt like a portent. Either that, or I'd been caught in an intersection.



## 5. Mysterious Loot

Waiting for the bus, my phone rang. The mysterious text messaging number.

I picked it up. "Hello?"

Leah's casual tones crackled through the bad connection. "How are you doing, babes?"

Relief surged through me hearing her sensible voice. "It was you!"

"What was me?"

"The messages the other night!"

"Who else did you think it was?"

I groaned. "You wouldn't believe what's been happening."

She laughed. "Been busy?"

"You could say that. Fancy a trip to the police station

with me”

“Me? No way thanks. Why’d you need a visit there?”

“That guy I was messing around with tried to jump me. Left some things at my house, so I’ve gotta take them back.”

She was silent. “To the police station?”

I tried to lighten it with a laugh. “Yeah, there’s a lot I’m not telling you. Stood in the bus stop.” I lowered my voice. “Bit close for comfort.”

“Okay, you want me to tell you about black people and police?”

Embarrassed, I blurted, “I’m not in trouble.”

“No, *you* won’t be. But by the time we get out of there, *I* probably will be. Gotta a career to consider, sorry hun.”

“Fuck’s sake, I’m sorry, I didn’t think about that.”

“Yeah.” Her tone told me that I didn’t *need* to think about it. White people white peopling as usual.

I gave up and changed the subject. “So what gives?”

“Got that interview tomorrow!”

Excitement rushed through me. “Team Leader Leah! You’ll crush it!”

“I know that!” She sounded smug. “Can’t guarantee anything, so I’m swotting up on it now.” She’d been tipped for the job anyway, but I knew she was up against it. Pump engineering was a white man’s world. Complacency would do her no good.

“What time is it at? Want to celebrate afterwards?”

“We’ll see, I might go out with Jez if he bothers to get finished early.”

I could almost taste my disappointment. My instincts were right, she didn’t want to spend time with me right now. I could never gauge it because I didn’t really understand why. We didn’t have issues between us, but I never knew if I was really accepted by my friends or if they just tolerated me to be nice. Or if I just expected more of them than was normal for friends.

“Let me know,” I said brightly. “It’s still buy-two-glasses-get-the-bottle-free at The Crypt.”

She laughed and promised me she would call if her boyfriend didn’t sort himself out. They’d been together years, ever since I’d known her. He hadn’t started out as the reliable type—youth had got the better of him for a while—but somehow they stuck together through everything. I didn’t know how anyone managed that. The prospect of finding a partner to trust my life with was distant at the best of times and right now, I couldn’t see it ever happening.

As I got off the bus in the direction of the police station, I couldn’t decide whether to ask for Sergeant O’Brien, or otherwise what to say to the person on the desk. Police stations give me the creeps—they’re so cold and bleak, windows like blank eyes watching everyone. The recently constructed building loomed overhead and the traffic whipped past me, stopping

impatiently only to allow crossing at the lights.

I yanked my tights up and my skirt hem down, said a little prayer to my angels and buzzed on the intercom.

“Can we help you?” The voice was crackly, though the equipment was new.

“I was involved in an assault. I’ve got some items I found after the police left.”

They buzzed the door open and I stepped in and up to the too-high counter with its glass partition. I glanced around nervously. The foyer was empty, its walls busy with missing and wanted posters. A pretty woman who looked faintly familiar was missing. I stared at the poster but couldn’t place her. A complicated poster showing CCTV images from a recent demonstration demanded that the public give up anyone they knew to the police.

The desk sergeant’s voice made me jump. “What have you got?”

I snapped my head around to face him. He rubbed the top of his balding head and replaced his glasses on his nose as he peered at me.

I pulled out the keys and wallet. “A guy tried to assault me on Sunday night, but my friend knocked him out and put him in hospital.” I pushed the items into the teller tray under the glass hatch. “I found this stuff hidden round the side of my house, looks like they belong to the man.”

The sergeant turned the wallet over and expertly removed the driver's license. He knocked his glasses wonky again as he scratched his nose.

"I heard what happened. Good, thanks, I'll pass it on to Sergeant O'Brien."

He lifted the keys close to his face and flipped through each one carefully. I turned to go, relieved I had fulfilled my decent duty.

The door to the side of the waiting room buzzed and swung open.

"Just a minute, Miss Tate." O'Brien stepped through into the space. "Can I have a word?" He looked deathly serious, like a school teacher with a naughty kid.

I stared at him, mouth numbed with shock.

"Come this way please." He held the door open. I was about to be arrested. Heart pounding and my body shaking, I felt sick, I walked through into a corridor. He led me down the way to a door and entered, switching on the light.

"Take a seat." He nodded to the Formica table in the middle of the room. I realised we were in an interview room.

"Am—am I in trouble? I just brought the guy's stuff back, he left it behind the gutter."

O'Brien frowned as he sat down opposite me. "Behind the gutter? What stuff?"

I nodded. "His keys and wallet were tucked between the

downpipe and the wall.”

His eyebrows shot into his hairline. “Keeping them safe, was he?”

I shrugged. I couldn’t work out if he was on my side or not. The interview room was claustrophobic and creepy with its strip fluorescent lighting and shadowy corners. The flickering lights irritated me, but I kept what cool I had left.

O’Brien sighed and pulled out his pocketbook. He flipped the pages and made a note.

“Right. I’ve got a few things I want to ask you about. Some information that doesn’t add up to what you told me. Are you ready?”

I just stared at him.

“Do you need a drink of water?” His tone was ice cold.

“Am I in trouble?” My voice came out in a cracked squeak.

“I’ve had a chat with the individual who attempted to assault you.” He flipped some notebook pages over. “It seems you dated him a couple of times before Sunday night. That true?”

The horror of my lie washed over me. I nodded in a fug, unable to even articulate the word ‘yes’.

“So, why didn’t you mention that before?”

I could only stare at him. All words had vanished from my mouth.

“Miss Tate? Why didn’t you tell me you knew him for

longer?”

I took a breath, trying to force words of some kind into my brain. Nothing came. Another breath. Still nothing.

“Miss Tate.” He didn’t seem angry. More curious than anything. “Miss Tate, I can see you’re in shock, but you’re going to have to tell me the things you didn’t tell me on Sunday.”

All I could think was that now he knew, he would also know I was a total fraud. That I deserved everything shitty that ever happened to me.

I pushed air through my lips. “I’m not a slag.”

He frowned a little. “No-one’s saying you are. Tell me what you know about the guy.”

“I went out with him a couple of times.” Indecision rolled around my brain. I didn’t know whether to just tell him everything. The visitation, the dates, the threats, everything. Panic washed over me repeatedly, like a tide of adrenaline coming into shore. The walls and the door changed perspective repeatedly, closer one moment, far away the next. I felt like an ant on an iceberg, no grip, no solid context.

“So why didn’t you mention this on Sunday?”

Lying by omission is still lying in the eyes of the law.

“I’m not a slag.” I cursed my inept mouth. Couldn’t keep my brain steady long enough to make sense. My hands were shaking uncontrollably. I moved the visible one under the table away from his eagle-eyed sight.

He sat back, intent on my face. "So you're not a slag. You didn't sleep with him."

I shook my head. "He took me out a couple of times and one time I went to his house but I didn't sleep with him." The fact that he'd enunciated the words gave me a verbal straw to grab hold of.

"Do you think," he began slowly but stopped. "Did he attempt to assault you because you didn't sleep with him?"

Misery swallowed me. Only the truth wanted to come out. I had nothing else inside me. I couldn't believe I'd managed not to tell him everything the first time.

"Mr Catcheside was quite clear he'd been out with you a couple of times. Said you'd invited him back to your house and then someone hit him over the head when he got to the door. Does that help?"

I stared at him. I didn't think he would believe the visitation. No way. I was going to be carted off to the men in white coats if I started telling a police officer all about that. The silence got longer and more awkward.

"Funny that he didn't mention his missing wallet," mused the police officer. "You'd think that would be the first thing on his mind. Makes the assault look premeditated."

He could have accused me of stealing David's wallet. I was confused. Why didn't he? I could have done. It would have looked real. Tease lures him back to her house and coshes him so

she could steal his bank cards and house keys.

“He was a creep. I told him I didn’t want to go out with him again, but he—” I faltered. I couldn’t tell him about the dream. “—I knew he liked me. I went out with him again, but this time he wanted to sleep with me.” I sounded like a way bigger dickhead now.

O’Brien narrowed his eyes. His police sense was probably screaming at him.

“But you didn’t invite him home?”

I scowled at the thought. “Didn’t you talk to the bar girl at the Snooty Fox?” At least she would confirm I didn’t leave with him.

He shook his head. “Not yet. So no cosy invitation to your house?”

“No way, I don’t know how he knew where I lived.” Yes I did. Gledhow Hall was easy to find on a map and I was bound to have told him where I lived. I was a fool.

“A couple of meals and bottles of wine and he thinks he owns your body, right?”

His words registered slowly. He wasn’t being horrible to me. “Something like that.”

He sighed again. Did a good line in sighs, I noted.

“Look, let me give you some advice. I’d tell my own girls the same thing if they got themselves into a mess like this. You go out with someone and you don’t like them, it’s simple. Don’t

see them again. You don't have to see them again and you don't need to pay someone in sex for a date."

The tears washed through me now. "I led him on."

"This isn't the Stone Age. He doesn't get to club you over the head and drag you back to his cave."

That wasn't how anyone else saw it. Indira. David. Probably Molly if she knew. I made some kind of mumbling sound.

O'Brien made some notes in his booklet. "So it's fair to say he lied to me?"

I nodded slowly, guilt on the tip of my tongue.

He stared across the table, but not directly at me. I realised he was looking at my quivering hands that once again rested on the table top. I attempted to steady them.

"I still feel like there's something missing here. Some information I'm supposed to know. You wouldn't know about that, would you?"

I dashed the tears away and shook my head, trying not to think about the visitation and David's threat. The police couldn't help there anyway. Not much point in trying to police the astral plane.

"Instinct's telling me to suggest you press charges against him, but I'm still not convinced CPS will pick it up, even with the wallet behind the drainpipe. Six of one and half a dozen of another. He attempted to assault you, was assaulted in the

process. Technically twice if you include the dinner.”

Numbness. Maybe David would leave me alone if I didn’t go further. Maybe he wouldn’t.

I tried to shake the thoughts out of my brain. “Has he said he’s going to press charges on Molly?”

“He has not and I would discourage it if he did, wasting police time by the looks of things.”

“What should I do?” I asked dully.

O’Brien stood up abruptly. “Get yourself away,” he instructed. “I’ll be in touch. Thanks for bringing in the items. Don’t go anywhere.” He opened the door of the interview room and I stood up.

As we walked into the waiting area, he nodded at me. He didn’t seem angry, just a bit forbidding.

“If you remember anything else important, give me a call please.” He handed me a business card.

I took a step towards the exit.

“Just a moment,” said the desk sergeant.

My heart tripped and I turned back, dread crushing my chest. O’Brien remained in the corridor doorway.

The desk guy shook the keys. “Any idea which one is the house key?”

I frowned to mask my terror.

“No idea. I only went to his house once in the time I knew him.” It was a massive stone pile near Street Lane in

Roundhay. I couldn't remember what kind of lock the door had.

The sergeant nodded at me and raised an eyebrow at O'Brien. "Thanks for your help." He opened a zip-lock plastic bag and popped the items inside.

As I left, uncertainty scuffed up guilt, like dust in the wind, heart pounding unnecessarily, a vicious circle of fear. I didn't know Caleb had nicked anything. I shook myself internally and applied logic to my thoughts. The bunch of keys seemed the same. As far as I knew, they were exactly what David had left behind. I focused on somehow 'knowing' that the keys were intact and nothing was wrong. Tried to feel how I would if Caleb hadn't appeared.

Still my brain played tricks on me, round and round on a single track. Sergeant O'Brien knew I was still holding back. He knew there were things he didn't know. This was going to bite me so hard if I didn't spit it out, but I couldn't see any way to tell the story so that they didn't throw me into a straitjacket. And I didn't know why O'Brien was being nice to me when I hadn't told him the truth.



Indira was half dressed-up to go out when I got home. I figured I'd see her out the door and make the most of having the flat to myself. Candles, music, TV of my choice. Bliss.

"I thought you must have gone out for a drink," she

mumbled through her toothbrush.

“Why did you put your lipstick on before you brushed your teeth?” Even frothing at the mouth, she was ridiculously glamorous.

She spat froth into the sink.

“I didn’t. I got ready, but ate some licorice torpedoes. Needed the sugar. I’m so tired.” She was on her feet all day, never stopped until the end of her shift. I hated kitchen work, the relentlessness ended me. I wouldn’t have the energy to go out afterwards, but Indira was a powerhouse most of the time. The rest of the time, she slept. I guessed that was her secret. She took care of herself pretty well and I was sure a lot of that was because she never let anyone walk all over her—not without a fight, anyway.

“Is it the vending machine guy?” I’d forgotten his name already. Something English and nondescript. As long as he treated her well, it didn’t matter what he was called.

She stared at me, then laughed. “I haven’t seen him for ages! Not my type, too—boring. Cute, but boring. Off to see Goldfrapp with the gang tonight. Jimmy got tickets for everyone six months ago.”

I grinned. Jimmy and Indira had birthdays on the same day. They both loved beautiful things, great food and electronica.

“When are you going to marry Jimmy?” I knew she never would, they were just good friends, part of a wider group whose

dramas kept them them all busy enough without all having relationships together too, but it was a running tease.

“Life isn’t about meeting The One and settling down, babe. If you don’t know that by now, I can’t help you.”

I shook my head with a smile. “Don’t take drugs. Don’t drink too much. Don’t lose your purse. Don’t get your toes trapped under a door this time.” The marble doors of a club’s ladies’ loos had almost broken her foot the last time she went out in strappy sandals.

She scowled. “Don’t stay up too late,” she retorted. “You need your beauty sleep more than me.”

Cheeky bitch. “No need for that.”

“You know I never buy drugs,” she pointed out tetchily as she tightened the straps on her high heels.

“I know that babe.” I gritted my teeth. Sure, she never *bought* drugs. Jimmy was generous with most material joys. I kept my mouth shut. Least said, soonest mended. None of my business anyway, people in glass houses and all that. “Just be safe and make sure you have a good time.”

She pulled on her top and straightened everything in front of the mirror.

“There’s curry in the fridge, hun. Help yourself.” Her obsession with keeping us in great food was a measure of her kindnesses too. She kept my household costs down and mostly refused the help, said she earned more than me and was more

concerned that I paid my council tax than contributed to the food bill. I got the impression she was glad to have someone to live with, though I could never figure why none of her close friends had ever moved in. Maybe they all had their own lives and families to live with. I didn't know any of them well enough to know. She kept us pretty separate. Probably because she thought I was weird.

I saw her off, a tiny figure tottering down the cavernous hallway in spiky boots and a flowing scarf. We didn't always understand each other, but she stuck with me, regardless of my dickhead situations I got us both into. That was worth putting up with a few judgey comments here and there.

I stepped back inside, grabbed a fork and sat down with the stew and mash Indira had plated up, let myself get used to the feeling of being alone at home.

The room was immense, a kitchenette in one corner, my bedroom built like a false box into another and a huge blank fireplace with a marble hearthstone.

I loved that a place where unbelievably rich people once lived and partied was somewhere I could call home, despite just scraping by on the meagre wages of a temp secretary. Even William Gladstone had visited Gledhow Hall during one of his tenures as Prime Minister back in the eighteen hundreds.

Appreciating the irony meant enjoying its grandeur in my own way, so after dinner I lit tea lights and incense sticks on

surfaces around the room and knocked off the big light. The shadowy atmosphere was far more comfortable.

I ran a hot bath and added drops of lavender and tea tree oil, inhaled the heady fumes as they hit me. A stream of sea salt crystals poured into my hand was the earthy cleansing for my spirit. I opened my crown chakra and imagined white light streaming through it, filling me up. I drew energy up from the earth through my feet with each deep inhalation. When tingles lit up the centre of my body, I directed it as blue-white light down my right arm into the salt.

I scattered the faintly glowing salt into the steamy bath and added some cold, stirring the water to dissolve the mineral. Sitting on gravel wasn't the best experience.

I undressed and inspected my hair in the mirror. Split ends told me I needed a cut, but that wasn't likely, given my current finances. A few greys were starting to come through. Probably stress. I tied it up, but just as I stepped into the bath, I heard a bang in the hallway and a series of heavy knocks at the flat door. Adrenaline exploded in my centre and I froze. My bathroom was the communal one for the flat, so it was built into the entrance hallway. I was locked into a darkened room with no windows in a dim, candlelit flat and surely no-one in the driveway could tell anyone was home.

What about Indira?

Something might have happened to her. Stuff was

always happening to Indira. Usually other people. The guy she was with wouldn't know how to get hold of me. She would never let me live it down if I pretended I wasn't home. She knew I wouldn't have gone anywhere.

The knocks reverberated through the walls. I clambered out of the bath, wrapped myself in a towel and unlocked the bathroom door. I waited with it still closed. Another loud bang. I tiptoed out of the room. The hall light was off. Whoever it was couldn't tell I was in through the spyglass. I crept up to the door and peered through the spyhole into the house entrance hall. The wood panelling of the staircase opposite the flat was illuminated, but no-one stood before me.

I waited. A sound came from outside the door, someone's foot scuffing the tile flooring. I looked again and leapt back in fright as the person knocked loudly and shouted. The voice was muffled and echoey, indistinct, but I recognised it at once.

I unlocked the door and opened it less than the chain's length. "Go away, Caleb, I don't know what you want."

He slid round the edge of the door frame. I hadn't seen him through the spyglass because he had stood against the wall to the side of the door and knocked from there.

"Let me in! I've got a present for you." He grinned and stuck his tongue out at me.

"I wish you'd just go away. Why won't you leave me

alone?” He tired me, bored me. Frustrated and vexed me. He had betrayed me when I loved him and now I was over him, was apparently squirming back into my life. However innocuous it seemed, it was outside of normal, a Trojan horse to my well being.

His face changed to annoyance. “Don’t be sulky. Let me in, I’ve got a deal for you.” He lifted a heavy plastic bag up to my face. “You can have this.”

I slammed the door shut in his face and breathed for a long moment. He knew me too well but I didn’t have to fall for it. Curiosity was the lesson I never learned but Caleb was a failed exam that would come round again if I wasn’t careful. A familiar demon whose dancing I knew wasn’t beneficial to my life. You think you’re in control for a while, when all of a sudden, *pow*.

I wondered if whatever he had might be saleable. I couldn’t do this any more. But I needed money so badly. I couldn’t do Caleb any more, I knew that. My mental health wasn’t up to it. But money. That affected my mind too, or the lack of it. Part of the problem was that I wasn’t money orientated. I didn’t strive for jobs where I might have earned more, mostly because those jobs wouldn’t have me. Indira would have pulled him through the door in a flash—well she would if it was jewellery. Fuck knew what it was. It depended what the contents of the bag were.

I wouldn’t know if I didn’t let him in.

I didn't want to know.

I wasn't that good. I was down to my last fifty quid if that.

"What's in the bag?" I asked loudly through the door.

"You'll never know if you don't let me in."

The bastard. He knew how to lure me.

I was so tired of being broke. He probably wanted me to sell it for him. If that was the case, it would be stolen. No fucking way. I wasn't going to prison for this fool. I'd run that risk for him before.

I drew my thoughts together and made a pact with myself. He could come in, show me the bag and if he wanted me to sell it, he could leave. If it was crap, he could leave. Right.

Maybe I could get one over on him just this once. Or just get something out of it for once.

Pigs might fly. My thinking wasn't joined up enough. Decision making was tough at the best of times. Under pressure, it was almost incoherent.

Fuck it.

I steeled myself and undid the chain.

He swaggered in with a bulging Morrison's bag-for-life, carrying it straight into the living room to dump on the kitchen counter. It tipped over, pouring out silk fabric pouches that rattled as they landed. I picked one up, clinging to my towel with the other hand.

“Feels like stones.” I worked the bag’s closure undone. The smell hit me. “Smells like incense.” The bag opened up to reveal rune stones.

“Smells like shit to me.” Caleb mocked.

A candle rolled onto the counter, then another. Pillars, yellow and green. Good quality wax. He shook the bag again. Boxes of incense sticks. A good brand, too.

I felt in the bag past the herbs, reminded of the lucky dip game at church fêtes when I was a kid. Stones and jewellery and something large, solid and very hard snuggled right at the bottom. As I pulled it out, the pit of my stomach jerked. The fist-sized amethyst geode glittered with energy.

“Caleb, where the hell did this stuff come from? What did you do, rob a crystal shop?”

He rolled a thin cigarette and popped it in his mouth.

“I’ll do you a deal, Inayat. This is yours. You don’t even have to agree to the deal. You’re kind of—owed it. It was—surplus to requirements.” He sparked a match with a dirty thumbnail and lit his fag. “Must be about four-hundred quid’s worth of gear in there.”

I slowly tipped the rest of the bag’s contents on to the surface. He did owe me plenty of money. I found two handfuls of large crystals and thumb-stones, an odd assortment of jewellery and a lifetime’s supply of incense.

“You don’t know how much is here. That geode could be

worth hundreds by itself.”

A silver ring with a dark red stone beckoned to me. I picked it up, examining it. “Is this a garnet?” The stone had a special energy all of its own. It pulsed in my fingers, even reverberated up my wrist, a living crystal.

Caleb shrugged. “Dunno, do I? You gonna sell it all?”

I searched his face, looking for some clue as to how he’d come by all this stuff. It was almost certainly robbed. His sharp blue eyes teased me. He knew something I didn’t and it was written all over him.

He smirked again and stood up straight, but when he spoke it was in a wheedling tone. “Go on, Inayat, find my ring.”

He fluttered his ridiculously long black eyelashes, a parody of a child begging for sweets. “You’d have liked my gran. She was a witch like you. It’s a protection vessel. I shouldn’t have given it away.”

I stared at him. He really thought I could get his ring for him.

“Please.” He seemed desperate and—genuine, not a quality I associated with Caleb as a rule.

He leaned into my space, lowering his voice. “Witches never really die, Inayat. Her shade won’t leave me alone. Says I should have kept it. Keeps telling me I’m gonna need it.” His eyes flickered past me as if someone stood behind me, his paranoia evident once again.

I turned and briefly caught a shimmer of a woman like a heat mirage in the kitchen light behind me. His gran. She'd been the only parent figure he trusted when he was a kid.

A vulnerable ache in my midriff was a danger signal. I opened my mouth to refuse, but changed my mind as I spoke. It might be a useful thing to try. He wasn't forcing the issue, just bribing me.

"I'll give it some thought, okay? No promises."

His whole demeanour changed. The desperation left him immediately.

"Enjoy, nice to see you, take care." He took a step towards the door.

"Just a minute, give me your number." It felt wrong asking for that. I wasn't interested in him. God knows I didn't want *that* after everything I had done to myself over him. That was for masochists. But letting him go with no way of getting in touch might not be smart. I prayed I wasn't kidding myself, secretly hoping for something more with the dickhead.

"How can I give you the ring if I don't know how to get hold of you?"

He was shifty, told me I couldn't call him, but I got the phone number. I couldn't test it because who knew where my mobile was, but a scribbled number was as good as I could do in my undressed state.

He escaped and I went back to the bag of booty. I picked

up the ring again and gazed into its red hue. I was uneasy—unsure of the stone’s provenance and intrigued and attracted to the ring. I threw it and the whole lot back in the bag, herbs and all, tucked it closed and shoved it in the back of my wardrobe under my towels. If they were stolen from somewhere it would be better to split the sack up and use some of the items. No-one could prove a thing then.

God! What was I thinking? Just like when I was his girlfriend, colluding on stupid pranks and preoccupations. I hated my mind sometimes.

I went back to the bathroom, locked the door and sat in the tub, considering events. Considering Caleb. A ‘good witch’. The stupid, warm feeling I got from that pissed me off. Why did his opinion of me still matter? I wasn’t any kind of witch, not really. Wasn’t sure I ever had been. I wondered if his dead gran had told him to find me and hoped she wouldn’t now chase me to get the ring back.

My unintentionally devastating contribution to the confusion of our strife had been to tell him at the height of our fall out that I’d cursed him and Olivia. Cue the disintegration of their lives—but nothing to do with me, despite my big mouth. I had no intention of wickedness, no idea how to cast a hex—I only knew about Wicca in those days, with its rules around what you could and couldn’t do to others. But my righteous anger had let me justify using his natural paranoia to terrify him. Even

though he'd ghosted me, I had known he would live in fear, psychology over magic for once.

When I'd first met him, he believed he was on the run from the Freemasons, hounded every night in his dreams. By the time he dumped me, I knew he went through phases of feeling persecuted. My angry claim sent him back over the edge into a downwards spiral and eventually terrified the daylights out of Olivia, hence her appearance on my doorstep threatening to call the police.

And now here he was, wanting me to find his ring as if he'd never accused me of trying to destroy his life. Needing my help so much he'd possibly nicked a load of magical supplies and jewellery and brought them to entice me. And I'd almost fallen for it.

I didn't have to do a thing.

I relaxed.

## 6. Debrief

I awoke in the middle of the night at the witching hour, the glistening moon through my window. The Goddess didn't show up until well after midnight on my side of the house and she had begun to dip towards the top of the wall. I wasn't sleepy at all. Wide awake but peaceful. Nothing to show for why I was conscious, unless it was the moonlight. Entirely feasible, given the illumination in my room.

I relaxed myself back down into sleep mode, keeping out the draughts under the covers. As I stared up at the ceiling, I heard a rustle. And another. The tiniest of noises, almost less than a mouse might make. Paper on paper, or plastic bag on paper. I listened hard, ready to locate the sound when it came.

Nothing. No hint of any creature moving about in the room.

I held my breath till my heart pounded too loudly to hear anything external to my head. I softly expelled the air, ears still straining, but the old house was silent and strong around me. It had seen many things and there was nothing to see right now.

The moonlight fell on my face as I turned over and settled under my duvet again. Just as I was dropping off, the rustle came again. It reminded me of a friend's pet tarantula I once looked after. She had liked the waste paper bin.

I grounded and felt outwards, searching for some kind of presence in the room. A tarantula would be a real surprise but there might be a spider of some kind. My spider sense was pretty good, usually.

Something lurked. Not the spiky impression of a spider, but large. Gigantic, even. It had a deep vibrational hum, not a sound—a vibration.

Everything—real world and ether—has its own hum. I don't know why, or how it works, just that it does. Something to do with beings—whether living or dead—vibrating at different frequencies. This one felt so large. As if it surrounded the whole room, ceiling and walls. A presence of massive proportions. Heavy, but not exactly oppressive. I couldn't pinpoint more than its deep-pitched metaphysical hum.



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