

Blood Bath (The Maurin Kincaide Series Book 4)

Pages: 298

Publisher: R Squared Publishing (February 18, 2014)

Format: pdf, epub

Language: English

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A Maurin Kincaide Novel

Rachel Rawlings

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Written by Rachel Rawlings

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Published in the United States by: R Squared Publishing

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This book is dedicated to my family. Thank you for your continued support, for all the FFY - Fend For Yourself- nights, for learning to appreciate Ramen noodles. I love you more than words can express.

A huge thank you to Stephanie Adams, the best Beta and cheerleader an author could have.

I have to thank my editor, Tina Winograd. It's always a pleasure working with you. You not only improve the story but my writing skills.

Patricia Statham, Katrina Hough and Melissa Lewis you ladies are great! Thank you for your support and for loving my characters! And of course the marvelous mad Madam Kelley Kell, thank you for your support and the awesome marketing graphics!

But first, on earth as vampire sent,
Thy corpse shall from its tomb be rent:
Then ghastly haunt thy native place,
And suck the blood of all thy race;

There from thy daughter, sister, wife,
At midnight drain the stream of life;
Yet loathe the banquet which perforce
Must fee thy living corpse.

Thy victims are they yet expire

Shall know the demons for their sire,
As cursing thee, thou cursing them,
Thy flowers are withered on the stem.

~The Giaour by Lord Byron 1813

1

"You have got to be kidding." I cursed a string of profanities that would make a sailor blush as the red and blue lights came into my rear view mirror before pulling to the side of the road. I wasn't even speeding. Well, okay I was going nine miles over the speed limit but wasn't there some unwritten rule about keeping it under ten?

When the all too familiar and unwanted doughy exterior of one Detective Masarelli appeared in my side mirror I banged my head on the steering wheel, managing to blow the horn in the process.

"I don't have time for this shit." I reached across the front seat and pulled the registration out of the glove box. Pairing it with my driver's license, I waited for Detective Dickhead on the off chance this was just a regular traffic stop. Highly unlikely. I was already late for my meeting with Arawn.

After traveling through the between so much, I sort of forgot about all those time consuming things like stop signs and traffic lights. I hadn't allowed enough time to actually drive there hence the sixty-four in a fifty-five.

The reason I was in a car instead of grey fog was Kellen. A member of the Seelie court and new Council chair, he somehow turned my magic against me. He could force me through the between to any destination of his choosing. The more I resisted Kellen the more excruciating he made the jump. He had my magic so screwed up I couldn't jump on my own without throwing up for weeks. So Aidan basically forbade me using the between.

Normally I wasn't one to let a guy tell me what to do but until my father explained Kellen's hold over my magic, the between was off limits. For once I was in complete agreement with my slightly

over-bearing vampire boyfriend.

A frustrated sigh escaped me. I had plans that so did not involve a fumbling detective who smelled like greasy take out and stale cigars. The evening's itinerary consisted of a meeting with my father, finding out the source of Kellen's hold over me and whether that made traveling in the between dangerous, followed by dinner with Aidan. And hopefully a few other things having to do with my vampire.

This was only the second night I had with Aidan since he got back from Reykjavik. That was almost a week ago. Unfortunately whatever was happening with the vampires occupied all his time. Iceland could be a synonym for our relationship at the moment. Something I fully intended to change once I got rid of Masarelli and on with the rest of my night.

"Kill the engine." Masarelli tapped on the glass and motioned for me to put my window down. He jumped back when Conry - my ethereal guard dog - poked his head up from the back seat.

"Was I speeding officer?" I handed him my license and registration.

"I'm not pulling you over for speeding, you dunce. Though your lead foot and this car is a recipe for disaster. We need to talk." Masarelli leaned into the Camaro, a low whistle escaping as he took in the fully refurbished interior of the classic muscle car. It really was a thing of beauty - every gear head's wet dream.

"And you thought pulling me over was the best way to do that?" I grabbed my cell phone off the seat and shook it in his face. "Ever heard of one of these? What'd you do? Put an all points bulletin out for me?"

"Thought about it. I knew you'd just send me straight to voicemail."

I thought about the Pink Panther theme song ringtone I gave him. Odds were good I would send him to voicemail. At least I always called back. "What the hell is so important that you had to pull me over?"

"You need to come to the station with me." He moved to open my door, like that would get me into motion. Conry took interest in the detective again and Masarelli quickly removed his hand from the handle.

"Look, I was going to talk to you about the Salem pack. I'll spare you the bullshit excuses and just admit I forgot. Cash is the new alpha. If I promise to come in tomorrow and tell you about it can I go? I'm already late for an appointment." I glanced at the clock on the radio. It was the only unoriginal thing in the car, well that and the speakers. I was now ten minutes late for my meeting with Arawn.

"It's not about the wolves. It can't wait until tomorrow." He backed up enough for me to open the car door.

"I'm not getting out of the car until you tell me what the hell is going on." I started to put the window back up.

"I am not going to discuss this on the side of the road. Quit busting my balls and get out of the dammed car."

"Quit busting your balls?" I opened the door and stepped out in a rush, thrusting my hand out.

"Hello, pot, my names kettle. It's nice to meet you. Why can't I just follow you?"

He ran a hand over his face, across stubble that was too long, even for him. "This is exactly what I was talking about. Because I know you won't follow me. Now would you please get in my car so I can take you to the station and get your expert fucking opinion on something?"

I relinquished any hope of salvaging my night, leaned inside the Camero, put the window up, grabbed the keys from the ignition and whistled for Conry. I glared at Masarelli over my shoulder as I walked to his car, daring him to question me about my dog. Masarelli locked and shut the car door, giving the Camaro one last approving look before heading back to his filthy unmarked patrol car.

Since I wasn't under arrest - at least not yet, the night's still young - I opened the car door myself and slid in behind the driver's seat. "Remember that movie we watched last week, Conry? The one where the dog ate the nice policeman's headrest?" I gave him a big belly rub as he stretched out over my lap and the rest of the back seat.

Masarelli gave me his best cop stare in the rear view and headed toward the station. "So you just forgot about the fact that a black ops merc killed the alpha and took control of the Salem pack? You got papers for this guy?"

"It's a pack not the AKC." I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Matthison approved his pass personally."

"It's expired." He blipped the lights and burped the siren to get through the intersection.

"Cash is Alpha now. The paperwork is irrelevant at this point. Unless of course you want to run him out of town on a technicality and create a power vacuum." I gave Conry a little nudge, my legs were falling asleep.

Masarelli spared a quick glance in the rear view mirror. "What happened to Roul? They eat him?"

"Eighteenth century France called. They wanted their superstitions back. How did you get this job again? They buried him, following pack ritual." Not even ten minutes with him and I was already exhausted.

"And his mate?" He couldn't know, could he? Was this what the mysterious trip to the station was really about? He needed my expert opinion on some trumped up murder charge?

"Dead." I didn't elaborate.

"Killing the mate isn't covered under the Meneur de Loupes agreement." He was fishing for something, anything to get rid of Cash.

My mouth was moving before I thought about the consequences. "It doesn't need to be covered by the Leader of the Wolves agreement since a werewolf didn't kill Olwyn. I did and it was self defense."

"And that's why you didn't bother telling us about it? I have to file a report and take your statement. I don't suppose you have someone to corroborate your self-defense story?"

Shit. "Besides the pack you mean?"

He shook his head. "What do you think?"

"No." If this sounded half as bad to him as it did to me I might actually be in trouble.

2

After years of taking over Masarelli's interrogations, I was the one answering his questions. He asked me how Olwyn died twenty different ways and I gave him the same answer every time - the truth.

"This is bullshit, Masarelli. Just call Pollyanna so I can go home." I locked my fingers behind my head and leaned back in the metal chair.

I knew the eyes and ears behind the two-way would send her in to put an end to this. Even if I was guilty of murder, Masarelli wouldn't get a confession. I knew all his tricks. Hell, half of them he stole from me.

Pollyanna walked in a couple minutes later. She was five foot nine, one hundred eighty pounds of scary ass albino bitch who supposedly gained the ability to sense a lie after being struck by lightning. Apparently the current of electricity that ran through her body fried some synapses and rewired the rest. She was a walking dowsing rod when it came to liars. Her name was plain Anna until she started beating polygraph percentages. Some dumbass thought it would be funny to call her Pollyanna. The joke was on him when she legally changed her name.

I never needed to call her on my cases but I'd heard enough to know being read by Pollyanna was going to hurt. The guys behind the glass must have ratcheted up the thermostat because the room was sweltering. Or maybe it was just nerves. I didn't kill Olwyn in cold blood. She would have killed me. She had to be put down. So why was I suddenly so nervous? Maybe because we didn't have a 'stand your ground' law and it was hard to prove self defense. If Pollyanna sensed how uneasy I was, she didn't say a word. She pulled out the chair across from me and sat.

I knew the drill, my arms were already extended across the table. She latched onto my wrists and dug her nails into my skin. Tiny jolts of electricity shot to my shoulders and through my chest. I instinctively pulled away but she jerked my arms back.

The lights flickered as her power crackled in the air. Pollyanna's skin turned a sickly gray as she sent her energy through my body. Holy crap she was terrifying. Why did I ask for her again? Oh yeah, I wanted to get the hell out of here.

I focused on what happened when Olwyn attacked me, how she completely lost her mind when Roul died and the permanent claw marks on my stomach. If I was lucky, some of it would get through.

It felt like thousands of fire ants crawled over my body. I fought the urge to squirm in my seat. Resisting her would only make it longer and hurt more. The burning, itching sensation burrowed under my skin using my nervous system to work up to my brain. Her grip tightened more as she picked through my mind. I freaking hated the feeling of things crawling on me. Inside my skull was a thousand times worse.

Sweat beaded on my forehead and ran down my spine as I fought the desire to give Pollyanna a sampling of fae magic. She was so close, her fingers biting into my wrists. I could use the connection to rip my way through her mind, rifling through her memories.

The muscles in my jaw twitched as I waged an internal war over giving her a taste of her own medicine. Something told me she could do this without the pain - she just got off on it. Unfortunately as much as I wanted this to be over, I needed her to tell Masarelli the truth.

If I tore my way through her head, made her feel even a tenth of what I felt now, she could get up and call me a liar. Her word was as good as mine used to be around here. She asked me the same questions as Masarelli and I answered the same way.

Her pallor returned to normal and she relaxed her hold on my arms. I gently pulled free of her grip and rubbed my wrists. A grin that said she knew all too well the position she had me in and loved every minute of it, crept across her face. She glanced at the mirror behind me before walking out of the room.

My phone started playing 'If I was your vampire' by Marilyn Manson from my back pocket. Aidan. I slid the phone out and looked at the message. 'Care to explain why my car is on the side of the road and your father is on my couch?'

Another text came through before I figured out the best way to summarize what happened. 'Or you could explain why you're with that derelict detective instead of me?'

I should have known Aidan had contacts in the department. As for my father? I imagine he went looking for me at Aidan's when I didn't show up for our meeting.

Masarelli was back with a manila folder before I got the chance to answer. He threw it on the table, spilling its contents. The face of a young girl stared up from the papers scattered across the table.

"I have four more files just like this. Know anything about that?" He tapped a crime scene photo of what looked like the same girl. Except in this picture she was sprawled naked in a bathtub, one arm slung over the side.

"Is this the part where I'm supposed to ask for my attorney? Do you honestly think I would tell you what happened to Olwyn if I killed five girls?" I pulled the pictures out of the file and flipped through them.

"You want to lawyer up? Same firm as last time?" He smirked, knowing Aidan wouldn't be able to masquerade as my attorney again. "I never said they were dead."

"Cut the shit, Masarelli." I spun the photo of the girl in the tub around to face him. "Even you could have put that together."

"What do you know about these girls, Maurin." He obviously wasn't thrilled about working with me again.

Not that I blame him. The last time we worked together things didn't go according to plan. Sure some of the problem was Masarelli's desire to cling to old stigmas about the Others and his less than stellar detective skills but in the end the jail cells in the station were destroyed, the department shrink was dead and we had to wipe half of what happened from the minds of Masarelli and his team.

I should've had Aidan plant the idea I wasn't just Liaison to the Council but an expert in preternatural activity and a valuable asset to any Salem Preternatural Task Force case. Not that Masarelli would have believed it for long. My fly by the seat of my pants investigating style would have blown that out of the water.

"I don't know anything." I flipped through the photos again, trying to place the girl but I'd never seen her before. I told him as much.

"Any talk about a rogue vamp or werewolf running around?" He sat across the table from me.

"Now that the whole killing Olwyn thing is behind us and we're friends again, tell me something. Where's my dog?" I didn't want to draw too much attention to Conry but I needed to know where he was, especially if I was going to be stuck here for a while. Something told me I was.

"I never said it was behind us. Pollyanna is still processing her report. Your dog is downstairs." He folded his arms and rested them on his stomach.

"Come on, you and I both know she already told you I was telling the truth or you wouldn't be talking to me about this case. And please tell me you didn't lock my dog in one of those disgusting cells downstairs."

"What the hell did you want me to do with him? He looks like a Great Dane that swallowed a mastiff. I can't have him running around the station. We gave him water, and Mike even shared his cheeseburger. The cells have been fully renovated thanks to you. Think of it like a big dog crate." He stifled a yawn.

I chose to ignore the fact he blamed me for the destruction of the jail when he was the one who took the amulet, the only thing hiding me from a demon, before locking me up a few weeks ago. "Fine, can someone take him for a walk later?" I wasn't sure what effect the iron bars of the cell would have on Conry since he was basically a fae creature but it certainly wasn't the time to find out. The less time he spent in the cell the better.

There was a knock on the door. Masarelli got up and poked his head into the hall. He grumbled something to whomever was out there before shutting the door and sitting down.

"Pollyanna says you're clean." He sounded a little disappointed.

I thought he was upset he couldn't use detainment as a threat to get my help instead of not having

a legitimate reason to arrest me. "I haven't heard anything about a rogue. vamp or otherwise. What makes you think it's not suicide? Maybe something was going on at school or home?"

"That's what we thought at first. There's one problem. We overlooked it with the first two girls. The lacerations and lack of any defensive wounds all point to suicide. By the third girl we couldn't ignore the evidence. Notice anything out of the ordinary in the picture?" He spun it around and pushed it closer to me.

I shook my head. Whatever he wanted me to see, I wasn't. "Young girl, seventeen, maybe eighteen. Wrist slit along the vein not across."

"What else?" He wasn't going to make this easy and just tell me what I was missing.

"No blood on the floor or outside of the tub. The water was drained. Was forensics already on the scene when this photo was taken?" I had it figured out but wanted to be sure.

"No, that's exactly how we found her." He nodded, confirmation I was on the right track.

"Okay, so if the tub was empty when the girl bled out, where's all the blood? If she filled the bath with hot water to speed up the process and ensure success as the direction of the wound suggests, where's the water?" I knew these were questions Masarelli had already posed to his investigation team. "Let's say it drained on its own before you found her, bad seal on the drain plug, where's the ring from the bloody water inside the tub?"

"Exactly. I'm ashamed to admit we assumed the tub drained and didn't question the lack of any residue on the porcelain. Seemed pretty cut and dry at the time. The girl's parents were a mess, we just wanted to get the scene processed and the body out of there." His expression darkened and I knew he silently berated himself for the oversight. "With the third girl we swabbed the drain and pulled apart the plumbing. We went back to the first scene and we went over the bathroom with Luminol, no trace of blood anywhere."

"Okay, so five girls found in tubs, wrists slit, no water or blood in any of the bathrooms. What else do they have in common? What's special to the killer about these girls?"

"So far just their age. All of them are eighteen, give or take a few months but not one of them is a minor. Different hair, different eyes, different body shape, some with tattoos some without. No patterns in home life or social status either. There's no physical pattern why these girls and not five others."

"Are they witches?" The last time Masarelli and I worked together an extremist group was killing witches. To keep the witches from casting while held captive and tortured, their hands were cut off and cauterized. In one case however, the witch's hands weren't cut off, her wrists were slit.

"No, I already looked into it. That rules out the Inquisitors. Last I checked they only killed witches, not normal girls."

"Maybe random is the pattern."

"Random is by definition not a pattern."

"For lack of a better word, it is a pattern if you're going out of your way to pick girls that aren't alike."

"We call that MO."

"Do you even know what that stands for, Masarelli? Maybe the killer is looking for girls who are different from each other so people won't immediately question the suicide cover?"

"The parents wouldn't talk to each other, let alone know about the others unless someone told them. We haven't released any information to the press. The families don't know we're treating these cases as homicides. You may be on to something, Kincaide."

"Don't sound so surprised. What's next, what do you need me to do?"

"I need you to liaise or whatever the verb is for what you do. Find out if anyone in your community knows anything about five dead girls."

"That's it? You don't want me to get a reading on any of the girls' belongings? You just want me to run information?" I tried not to sound offended.

"You don't have a badge anymore."

"You don't have to sound so happy about it. Fine, I'll ask around and let you know what I find. We done here? I can go?"

"Yeah, I'll have Mike bring up your dog."

"How about a ride back to my car?"

"I'm not your fucking chauffeur. Call someone to pick you up."

"Hey, I said I would follow you but no, I had to ride--"

"Fine. Quit your bitching and come on."

A commotion exploded outside the interrogation room. Masarelli jerked open the door to find Conry charging down the small hallway that led to the lower level where the cells were housed. The tow chains they used as a makeshift leash rattled as my dog tried to shake off the patrolman dragging behind him.

I let out a low whistle. Conry slid to a halt, his nails struggling to find purchase on the tile floor. The patrolman leaned against the wall trying to catch his breath. I closed the few feet between us and unhooked the heavy chains around Conry's neck. A normal dog would have struggled under the weight.

"You didn't have to chain him like he's a kraken. He's really well behaved." I rubbed his chest while he nuzzled my side.

Masarelli leaned in. "I'd let it go. Unless you want to explain exactly what he is and where he came from. That's no ordinary dog and he's not registered."

Conry licked the scowl from my face. "We're going home, boy." I had half a mind to tell Masarelli to forget the ride. I'd jump us back to my apartment but it wasn't worth the backlash of exposing my new skill to SPTF. No one, not the council, Aidan, or my father thought it a good idea for the Norms - especially the ones working for SPTF - to find out I could alter reality and with it the potential to change events.

With Conry in tow I followed Masarelli out of the station. I barely made it through the door before my dog bolted past me down the steps. I called after him and moved from behind Masarelli to give chase.

"Looks like I won't be needing a ride after all." A smile crept across my face as I took in the sight of a vampire, feared among his kind for the harsh justice he served, giving my dog a belly rub.

Aidan quickly regained his composure and leaned back on the side of the car. The similarities of hard lines and muscle between him and the Camaro were not lost on me. I did my best not to melt under his smoldering stare. "Thought you might need a lift." His accent was thick and skin was paler than usual. He hadn't fed yet.

"You might start your questioning with him," Masarelli grumbled on his way back inside.

"Some lawyer you turned out to be." I tentatively closed the distance between us. Something besides hunger had him on edge.

"You seem to have a penchant for getting arrested." He pulled me against him and familiarized himself with the sensitive spot behind my ear.

"I was a little surprised you didn't try to bust me out." I leaned back, putting a little distance between my neck and him. Aidan had never asked to feed from me but his agitation was bubbling beneath the surface and I didn't want my jugular to get caught up in it. He's tasted my blood twice. Never as a meal. I didn't want his obvious hunger and emotional state to make this a first.

"As was I, when I learned you confessed to killing Olwyn in order to protect the alpha." The last word came out in almost a growl.

His relentless insecurities over my friendship with Cash were pissing me off, so I fired back. "I simply told the truth. Something that might serve you well in this relationship instead of the half truths and secrets between us lately."

He bristled at my accusation. "I see you've already resorted to hitting below the belt?"

I glared at him.

"I suppose now you'll stomp your foot and pout those beautiful lips." He ran his thumb along my bottom lip for emphasis.

I swatted his hand away. "I don't pout."

"You do and as much as it pains me to admit it, I find it irresistible."

"Knock it off, Aidan. I know you know something."

"I know a great many things. You have yet to tell me what the detective questioned you about. What makes you so sure I know anything about his case or that this is even a council affair?" His hand found its way to my lower back, stopping me from inching away.

"How about that response for starters? Aidan, we are well past the part where the council tries to keep this a secret. SPTF is asking me about rogues."

"A rogue wolf is a good place to start any investigation given the new regime."

"He wasn't referring to just wolves. What's going on, Aidan?"

He let me go abruptly, preparing himself for the argument he knew was coming and I stumbled back a step. "You know there are things I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?" Another low blow. Aidan had been nothing but truthful with me - as much as his position allowed anyway. After the coven betrayed me, he knew I would accept nothing less than honesty, a condition testing the bounds of his obligation to the council during more than one of our all night conversations.

He actually looked pained by the question. "I have never lied to you. Especially not when I told you there would be things I couldn't talk about."

"Things like dead girls in bathtubs?"

"Get in the car, Maurin." He was trying to keep the anger from showing on his face and was failing miserably. His eyes and thickening Irish accent always gave him away.

Looked like I over played my hand, pushed him too hard too soon. I should have built up to what Masarelli's investigation was really about. Instead I blurted it out, needing to know everything, to be a part of every council disaster take over. I was never getting him to tell me anything this way. I needed to figure out a way to salvage the conversation and our night together.

"Would you get in the god forsaken car?" he snarled, mistaking my lack of movement as a dismissal. "Why are you so hell bent on ruining our night together? Quite possibly the last night we'll have before the Council sends me away again."

News he would be leaving again so soon was a sure fire way to stop me asking about dead girls in bathtubs. At least for a little while. I'm surprised he didn't say checkmate. "I wonder what's causing the sudden up tic in vampires behaving badly. You've barely been home a week. How long are you going to be gone this time?"

He didn't say anything. The muscles in his jaw, another of his tells, twitched. Something was wrong, something more than chasing down another vampire in the throes of a blood lust.

"How long, Aidan?"

"Indefinitely." He practically choked on the word.

I felt sucker punched in the gut. Sure he was over protective and jealous and stubborn but I had those same endearing character traits as well. In reality we hadn't been a couple very long and time alone had been scarce but that didn't stop him from worming his way into my heart. I wish I had seen the signs before it was too late. I let him in and now he was leaving. The emptiness I felt when I thought Oberon died was nothing compared to the darkness eating into my heart.

"Maurin, I'm sorry." He pulled me into his arms, burying his face in my neck. The chill of his cool breath on my skin matched the cold seeping into my bones, snuffing out the fire that usually roared inside whenever Aidan touched me. "I didn't mean to tell you this way. Will you please say something?"

There were no words. I broke free of the embrace, not allowing myself even a moment of comfort in his arms. How many times had my fears and weaknesses been chased away while he held me? Too many in too short a time. No, it was better this way. I wouldn't let him soothe me as he said his

goodbyes. I stepped back, the mixture of sandalwood and spices - of Aidan - clinging to me. I wrapped my fingers around Conry's collar and faded into the between.

3

It didn't take long for him to show up outside my door. If I had somewhere, anywhere else to go I wouldn't have come back to my apartment. I barely managed to strip off my clothes and turn on the shower before the pounding started. I thought about letting him in, if only to spare the door any more abuse - until he called my name.

Anger laced with anguish as he demanded I open the door and talk to him. Instead I stepped into the shower and let the hot water hide my tears.

I was still raw from seeing my so called family after a decade of my mutually agreed upon exile and subsequently ending that chapter of my life. It had only been a week since my sister's wedding. I didn't want to go but hadn't had the heart to disappoint Frankie. She was the only person in my adoptive family that I cared about or that seemed to care about me for that matter.

I left the house in Beacon Hill where I was raised as soon as I could. They never looked for me and I never looked back. Until the wedding invitation came in the mail. It was hard to say goodbye to Frankie at the reception - we both knew it was forever- but there was no place for her in my life now.

Now I had to do it again. Except this time there wasn't anything mutual about it. Vampires were typically over protective and territorial when it came to the people and places important to them. Aidan warned me of that on more than one occasion. I took it to mean he'd be around for a while. I guess I wasn't that important because now he was cutting me loose. Sure I knew the Council was the real reason he was saying goodbye but my heart blamed him for it anyway.

I scrubbed, lathered, rinsed and repeated, then stood in the shower until I drained the hot water heater and the cold forced me out. I wrapped my hair in a towel before drying off with another. The pounding stopped. I let out a sigh and then another. I was relieved and resentful all tangled into one. Relieved that he stopped trying to beat down my door and resentful for exactly the same reason.

Half of me wanted him to go the hell away, the other half wanted him to stand out there all night miserable and professing his devotion. I was about to throw on pajamas and crawl under the covers when the sound of another person outside my door made me freeze.

"What are you doing here?" Aidan's voice was so cold I half expected frost to form on the door.

"I'm here for Maurin." Cash managed to insinuate a hell of a lot with those four little words.

Power seeped into my apartment from the hall. The walls and door concaved from their opposing energy. Life and death clashed like two weather fronts. One warm, one cold, creating the perfect storm in the confined hallway. Something, more likely someone, slammed against my door and I jumped. Conry didn't stir from his favorite spot on the couch. Seeing as how they posed no threat to me, he was content to let the two of them wage their little war outside my door.

An image of the two crashing into my apartment, bruised and brawling, flashed through my mind. While some carnal and obviously twisted part of me found that arousing, I had to stop them before things went too far. Cash was a member of the Council, fighting him outside of a sanctioned challenge was the same as treason - even if Cash was egging Aidan on.

I threw the door open, my lack of clothes completely forgotten until one set of eyes raked over my chest barely hidden by the towel and the other scorched their way up my exposed legs. I was immediately assaulted with emotions - rage, jealousy, desire. I clutched the towel with one hand and the doorknob with the other for support.

"I thought you'd get the hint after the first twenty minutes of pounding. You're going to break the damn door."

"With these wards? I hardly think so." Aidan pointed to something etched into the inside top of the door jam.

Squinting I struggled to see the faint markings. The more I concentrated, the more visible the tiny runes became. Once I knew what to look for I saw them running down the sides as well. Why hadn't I seen them before? I needed to add the strange markings to the ever growing list of things to talk to Arawn about.

Their collective breath, taking in my scent, as I stood between them sent a chill racing down my spine and goose bumps across my skin.

"Well, in that case you can rip out each other's throats for all I fucking care." A bitter laugh escaped me as almost identical looks of shock took up residence on their faces. I slammed the door shut and headed for the vodka in the freezer.

"Maurin. Open the door." Cash's turn to knock.

"Knock until your knuckles bleed. I don't give a shit." I poured a shot of espresso vodka and slammed it back.

I heard the door open and cursed myself for forgetting to lock it. Not that they couldn't have busted it down if they wanted to. It was respect for me, for my space, that kept them on the other side of the door. That and the wards, which apparently only stopped someone who meant me harm. Without thinking or caring which of them entered first, I turned and hurled the shot glass. Cash caught it before it hit him in the face.

"I'm guessing that was meant for you." He cast a smug glance Aidan's way and walked in like he owned the place.

"It was meant for whoever was dumb enough to let themselves in. What good are wards if anybody can waltz in my front door?"

Conry's collar jangled as he jumped off the couch. A low growl building in his throat. Cash tentatively held out a hand. My guardian sniffed, nudged and licked. Apparently satisfied that this wasn't a home invasion, Conry returned to his spot on the couch.

"Hey, you're supposed to be on my side. Some guardian you are." Conry let me know exactly what he thought about that comment by turning around on the cushion until I was literally looking at the wrong end of a dog. I took a swig from the bottle since Cash still palmed my shot glass. "Are you going to tell me what you want?"

"You know what I want." No insinuating there, that was pretty straight forward. A little glint flashed in Cash's eyes. Good thing Aidan didn't see it.

The oxygen was sucked out of the room and replaced with a suffocating amount of testosterone. Aidan finally crossed the threshold and positioned himself between the two of us.

"Stop trying to piss him off, Cash. He and I are managing just fine without your help. Tell me what you want and go home. Please."

For the second time, they both wore similar expressions. Not shock, maybe concern. I don't think it was the please so much as the way I said it. Even I caught the hurt and exhaustion in my voice. I wanted to take it back as soon as it left my mouth.

"Your presence has been requested at Risqué." Cash was all business now.

"You're a councilman not a messenger. They couldn't get someone else to get me?" Something was up. Aidan was too quiet.

"We did send someone else. He was supposed to have you there forty-five minutes ago." He didn't need to tell me Aidan was supposed to take me to the Council. The menacing glare he gave Aidan said it all.

The four walls that made up my cramped bedroom crumbled around me. The worn carpet fading beneath my feet was quickly replaced with familiar nothingness. I decided to take off for my appointment with the Council before either of them offered me a ride. I didn't want to be trapped in a car with either of them right now. Cash would want to know why Aidan was locked out of my apartment. Aidan would force me to talk about him leaving. I'd rather risk running into Kellen than have either of those conversations.

After Kellen hijacked my power and forced me to jump to Cash, I knew he could travel through the between too. I'd been avoiding jumps in an effort to stay off Kellen's radar. Aidan would be furious I chanced it twice in one night but he was leaving so I didn't give a shit what he thought. At

least that's what I told myself. I managed to get back to my apartment with no ill effects and no sign of Kellen earlier. Getting to Risqué should be easy.

After driving everywhere I needed to go, being back in the between was a balm to my frayed nerves. Energy seeped into my pores, sinking deeper into tissue, muscle and finally bone. Power I recognized as my own coursed through my veins before pooling in my core. Like cold water pouring into a glass, it rose from the pit of my stomach, behind my ribcage, to the hollow of my throat until it nearly burst from my chest. Holes in my shields were filled. I hadn't known until that moment how off balance I was by shutting myself off from this.

Even Conry seemed to benefit from being here. Symptoms of dehydration and malnutrition I hadn't noticed before faded away. He needed this as much as I did. Roped muscles filled out his frame while his white coat thickened. Fire flared in his red eyes. He looked like the ferocious beast I first saw crossing to Salem with Arawn last year.

Feeling better than I had in weeks it took almost no effort to jump to the seedy night club recently purchased by the Council. Two sets of eyes bore down on me again as I stepped through the veil that separated the dark parking lot behind Risqué from the between. I knew they would both be waiting at the back door for me to arrive.

This time they weren't wearing matching expressions. Aidan's eyes filled with the anger he was trying to hold back. He coiled like a viper ready to strike. So of course I ignored him. I caught the glint in Cash's eyes that was becoming all too familiar as I brushed past him on my way through the door.

"You're so fucking stubborn," he chuckled behind me.

Blood in the streets. Bodies piling all around. All signs point to a rogue vampire. But if my training has taught me anything, it's that things are seldom what they seem in a preternatural investigation. Magic, mayhem, murder; all of that is a welcome relief to my father playing match-maker in my abysmal personal life.

Can I catch the killer before the body count rises? Or will my divided attentions have deadly consequences?

I'm Maurin Kincaide, and I'm what the things that go bump in the night fear.

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