



THE
TRAVELERS
K. L. KRANES



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Chapter 1

Dagny

My fingers shook violently as I dragged them across the smooth, cool surface of the metal coffin. It was pitch black inside the eight-foot cell and there was no way for me to tell if my sight had returned. I had been through this before but my new heartbeat still quickened with fear every time. In darkness and confinement, rational thought did not always prevail.

Suddenly, a spasm raced through my right leg. The sensation was more intense than I ever remembered feeling. That wasn't saying much. I forgot a lot of things. The power to magically move your soul to another person's body was not as exciting as it sounded. It had consequences. For me, one of those was memory loss.

To fit my soul into this new body, I had to chip away little pieces of myself and let them fall into oblivion. Every time I 'Traveled', I lost more and more of myself. I was just a bunch of broken pieces inside the shell of a body. I didn't even know what it meant to be me anymore.

When my limbs began to wiggle, I knew I'd finally whittled away just enough to resemble a real person.

A jarring crack of a metal door thrown open announced one of my siblings was free.

"Where's Dagny?" my brother asked, with a grunt.

"This is unacceptable. Look at this. I'm ugly," my sister barked, ignoring my brother's question.

Hiding in my cold, dark container, I felt as if millions of wires were attached to my body. With every word spoken, another wire jerked and compelled me to leave my cell. But I wasn't ready yet.

When I 'Traveled', which is what we call it when we move from one body to the next, I felt free, at least for a little while. My soul floated above the earth. I had no weight, no burdens. I didn't have eyes in that state of being. But my mystical vision saw all the auras on earth. Beneath me millions of colored lights pulsed in the darkness.

My parents called it flying on the wings of the raven because the raven ushered souls across realms. We Traveled by summoning its power. This was the first part of the transition. It was beautiful. It was peaceful. It was fleeting.

Then came the second part, my parents called that the landing, which was a nice way of describing it. It was more like crashing. I crashed down into someone else's dead body and had to force my way through the flesh and into the marrow. I can't lie. That part hurt.

My soul seeped into the different crevices of the corpse and worked hard to spark it back to life. This process was normally slow. I slowed it down even more. I wanted to be the last one to fully wake into a new body. Actually, the truth was, my much older siblings needed to be first. So I let them. They always looked at me funny when I did anything faster than they did.

That was just my physical transition. The spiritual transition was even harder.

My new body had to connect to my magical abilities. To do this, I accessed the four elements—earth, air, fire and water. Everything in Wicca was based on these elements.

It was time to start the next phase of the process.

I focused on earth and coaxed the energy from the ground toward my body. Soon, a primal heat warmed my toes and spread up through my chest. Next, I tackled air. Breathing in and out slowly, I concentrated on exciting the oxygen around me. With my mind, I moved the atoms back and forth until my hair whipped at my face and a breeze tickled my arm. Two down, two to go. It was time to conjure water. I did this by willing the water vapors in the air to condense. Eventually, droplets formed above me and dripped down onto my nose. Last was fire. I focused only on the hum of electricity in the atmosphere. When my skin trilled with electric sparks, like tiny blue lightning strikes, it was time to wiggle my supernatural abilities.

I started by concentrating on one object, in this case the door handle to my coffin. An iridescent ball formed just beyond my toes, pulsing like a dim star. I flexed my mind and the star solidified into the chrome handle that stood between me and the outside world. As soon as I pictured the lock turning, the door cracked open and a sliver of light fell across my bare feet.

“Finally,” Jason yelled.

I slid out.

“You’re the pretty one,” Ava cried, seething. “You’ve got to be kidding me. I’m taking this up with Mother.”

That cold, solitary coffin was suddenly looking extremely appealing.

“Oh, Ava, don’t be upset,” I replied. “You’re so ugly you’re cute. Like a bulldog.”

I couldn’t resist.

Ava looked at me with horror and then began darting noiselessly through the dark room in search of a reflective surface. Finally finding something suitable, she ran her fingers slowly through her dirty blonde hair and frowned with dissatisfaction.

There was nothing wrong with Ava’s face or body. She was medium height with a thin, pointy frame. That alone should have made her happy. Her eyes were small but they seemed to fit her angular face and sharp aquiline nose. Regardless of her appearance, she maintained her pristine, birdlike composure.

I have never been able to stand Ava’s superficial nature but I must admit I, too, felt compelled to steal a glance at my reflection. I had to squint to see my face. In fact, the entire room was fuzzy.

“Well, this should make you feel better. I’m going to need glasses,” I said. Her consolation prize. “Guess that means I’ll have to be a nerd.”

“Sorry, little sister, it’s cheerleader or prom queen in your future,” Ava said, motioning for me to follow her toward the door. “Your eyes will clear up in a few minutes. Did you forget again?”

Yes, I had forgotten. Just one little fact but I forgot a lot of little facts. And little facts added up. It wasn't just my vision that became blurrier in a new body. I became blurrier. Without all my memories, I felt incomplete. Who was I really? I was a sister, a daughter, a witch. There had to be more to me. For someone who could be boiled down into just a soul, why did I feel soulless?

My family didn't understand. They remembered everything. They said the memory loss was because I was young. I have only existed for about three decades. They're over 400 years old, give or take a few decades. They built up the magical ability to retain memory. Apparently, I will too, eventually.

The three of us tiptoed into a barren, narrow corridor illuminated only by dim halogen lights that flickered ominously. My new body shivered. Just then Jason stopped short and extended his arm out protectively in front of me. Before I could protest, he put a finger over his lips and nodded his head in the direction of the hallway.

Following his gaze, I saw a man standing several feet away. Clothed in a crumpled brown suit, his shoulders curved forward slightly, as though the world rested upon them. The body was different but the posture was unmistakable. I breathed a sigh of relief. "Dad."

A quick inventory of this new version of my father revealed a rugged, weathered face that should've been accompanied by windblown hair. Instead, the gel-crusted follicles looked like a restrictive helmet. His skin, like all of ours, still had the sheen of death but his body seemed strong and young. This body had gone on hikes. It had battled river currents and run miles. It was an interesting contrast to my father's pensive, quiet eyes. Except his expression was not thoughtful, it was full of pain.

Jason stood stiffly in the middle of the hall, looking at him with a blank expression. Jason's body also had brawn and the same sandy-colored hair as my Dad. Clearly, the deceased son shared his father's love of physical activity. The main difference was Jason's body still had a layer of baby fat covering his muscles. He was puffy and not yet defined. His eyes had a single-mindedness, though—run, survive, protect. Those were not the eyes of the dead boy. Those were Jason's eyes.

Our eyes are the one thing we brought with us from body to body. It was nice to have one part of my family that hadn't changed after all these years. My father's eyes were warm and wise with layers of brown hues. Ava's were also brown but much darker, nearly black. When you looked Ava in the eyes, it was like looking into a mysterious, black hole. Jason's were dark green, with small, almost inconsequential, flecks of yellow that reminded me of tiny, distant fireworks. My mother's eyes were a haunting light green that instantly mesmerized.

Suddenly, I realized my mother and her eyes were nowhere to be seen.

"Where's Mom?" I cried out, fearful of the answer.

"She's gone." Dad's hoarse voice barely registered in my ears. "They got her."

Ava's lips tightened as tears broke through her impassive eyes. "No, not again," she said.

Marc

The old car chugged up next to me. It was faded and dinged. Still, it was a good, sturdy vehicle. You just had to look closely to see it.

“Get in,” she called out through a small crack in the window.

“I’m going to walk,” I said.

She looked like she wanted to argue. Instead she said, “Fine, whatever.” With a roll of her eyes, my sister sped off.

I shrugged it off and started to walk toward home.

I was a creature of habit. I didn’t usually change my routine. After school I either went home with my sister, Jillian, or hung out with my best friend, Cody. Lately, the routine wasn’t enough. There was something missing from my life, like a void or emptiness inside me. That was the only way I could describe it. It didn’t just exist, it cried out to be filled.

The closest I’d come to filling it was two weeks and three days ago. From the top of the rocks above the Potomac River I jumped headfirst into the rushing water. I was a strong swimmer. Plus, I had calculated the likelihood I would actually die. Don’t worry, it was low. But that small margin of error made my pulse race and set me right again, at least for a while.

Today, the hungry, empty part of me was back and needed to be fed again. Walking gave me time to figure it out. Yes, even my spontaneity required some degree of planning. My family couldn’t know about this new adrenaline junkie part of me. They would not take it well, especially my mother.

My house was still about a half mile down the street. There was a car moving fast in the distance. The engine roared with every upward gearshift. It was probably less than 400 feet away and traveling about 50 miles per hour. I had about 5 seconds. Could I make it?

I lunged forward. My backpack banged against my ribs. The car rushed toward me. The driver didn’t even have time to slam the breaks. He whizzed by, barely missing me. His mirror clipped my backpack and I spun around. My heart pounded. The hunger subsided.

It would be back soon, though. That was not risky enough.

As I got closer to my house, I noticed my sister leaning against the front door. This was strange, especially since she was sun averse. She preferred her skin pasty and white.

“Did you just run in front of a speeding car?” Jillian asked as I came into earshot.

“No, I was just crossing the street,” I answered. “You should get a real prescription in those glasses. That guy didn’t come close to me.”

“Didn’t look like it to me. Whatever,” said Jillian as she looked down through thick-rimmed black glasses at her chipped dark purple fingernails. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“Trying to live a sincere life despite many existential obstacles,” I quipped as I reached the stoop.

“Funny,” she said, flatly. She had a sardonic way of speaking, similar to a late-night talk show host who slyly mocks her guests. “Nietzsche?”

“Kierkegaard.”

Her eyebrows rose in acknowledgment. I reached for the doorknob. She put her hand on my arm before I could grab the handle.

“Wait,” she commanded. “Seriously, what are you doing here?”

“Well.” I pulled out my wallet. “I live here. Yep, it says so on my license. See?”

“You said this morning you were going to Cody’s after school. I thought that’s why you decided to walk.”

“I changed my mind. Can we talk about this inside where there is cold air thanks to this modern convenience called AC?” I asked. Even though it was technically fall, the sun was beating down harshly on my neck. Thanks global warming.

“The AC isn’t on,” she replied quickly.

“Why?”

“The usual reasons. It broke and Mom hasn’t called the repair man yet. Our favorite stepdad does basically nothing other than sometimes help pay the mortgage. Whatever, just answer the question, Jerk-face.”

“Jerk-face? You’re really pulling out the good insults today,” I noted.

Her frown deepened.

“OK, OK,” I gave in, “I really wanted to have a close call with a car today.”

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

It was. I hoped humor would trivialize what she saw.

“Yes, but don’t smile. You might hurt yourself,” I said. “Can I go inside now?”

She hesitated. I got the distinct impression she was trying to keep me out of the house.

She rolled her eyes and moved aside. “Whatever, I give up,” she shrugged.

It didn’t take much.

As I entered the house, there was an unnatural silence. Typically, there was a constant hum of electrical currents, forced air and television. Today it was eerily still, like a vacant home.

Jillian followed me inside.

“What’s going on, Jill?” I asked.

“Mom’s sick, yada, yada, yada. She’s upstairs writing her next will and testament,” Jillian recited in a typical disinterested tone.

Despite everything I knew about my mother, my heart still pounded rapidly as I took the stairs two by two. When I got to her bedroom, she was lying listlessly on the bed. Her husband, my stepfather, stood next to the window, silent.

“Mom, are you OK?” I asked.

The smell of recently extinguished candles filled the room, which was odd. I’d paid the electric bill. It was \$85.12, slightly higher than the previous month’s \$81.17.

Looking around, I saw the alarm clock was still working.

“Oh, honey. I’m just a little sick.” Mom smiled thinly and took a sip of water. “Don’t I look OK?” she asked, seeing the look in my eyes.

“Don’t worry, Elaine, the Magic Mirror still says you’re the fairest in the land,” I said. Sometimes I used her first name when she was being particularly dramatic.

“Oh, Marc. You’re terrible.” She giggled, showing some of her normal liveliness.

“I’ll make you some soup,” I told her. “Chicken? Your favorite?”

“Marc, can we talk in private?” my stepfather interrupted. My mother looked away. Reluctantly, I walked with him to the other side of the room.

My stepfather was a plain man, small and thin with medium brown hair. I towered over him by more than a head. If he spoke, he spoke softly. He didn’t seem to fit with my mother. She was charismatic and beautiful. There was nothing remarkable about him, except his amber eyes. They were so light they glowed like embers. Still, my mother never left his side. She was smitten. I couldn’t figure out why. It wasn’t really my business anyway.

“It’s nothing really,” he half-whispered. “However, I think it’s a good idea if you go to your grandmother’s for a while.”

This was all very weird. Mom wasn’t sick yesterday.

“What’s going on?” I asked, looking to mother. “Why do you want me to go to Gram’s?”

“Please, honey,” she said, hoarsely. “This way I don’t have to worry about you while I get better.”

“You worry about me?” I almost laughed. This was coming from the woman who still couldn’t figure out how to work the dishwasher.

My mother was a former starlet who had a brief stint on a television show. Her career never took off and she never became a star the way she always wanted to be but no one ever told her. She still walked around like the world was meant to serve her.

“Well, there’s something else too,” she said, looking down. “Your grandmother called last night. She broke her hip and needs some help.”

“Mom, I love Gram. But wouldn’t it be better to call a nurse rather than send me across the country? I wouldn’t even know how to help her.”

“Yes, see, I didn’t even think of that. That’s why I need you to go out there. Help her figure it out. She’s all alone,” my mother said. “When your weasel of a father abandoned us, he abandoned her too.”

It still shocked me that I felt the impulse to defend him. My biological father left us. The man standing here, Benjamin Michaelson, was my stepfather. He was devoted to my mother but he didn't pay much attention to my sister or me. Neither did Mom. It wasn't that surprising. My father held the family together. He cooked the meals and paid the bills. He forced us to spend time together. At least once a week, he pulled us all into the den and we sang songs as he played guitar. Those were on the good days, though. On the bad days, he and my mother fought a lot. One day, after a huge fight, he packed a bag and never came back. To be honest, even though he was the one who left, she was the one I blamed.

Still, it was hard to hate her. She was the one who stayed. Occasionally, she'd try to make up for her lack of parenting by taking us to a movie or lunch. This on-again off-again Mom business no longer affected me. It still bothered Jillian. She wanted a real Mom.

"I'll go if you want me to," I assured her. "But who will help you take care of the house?"

"Oh, Jillian can do that," Mom said, airily.

"Jillian?" I laughed and Jillian shot me a look that practically singed my nose hairs.

"I am the older sibling," Jillian said, in her aloof tone to convince me she didn't really care.

"Coulda fooled me," I mumbled. "What about school? I could miss a week or more."

"Oh, Marc, could you just do something for once without plotting out everything beforehand?" my mother said, with her typical impatience.

"And we all know you could miss half the school year and you'd be fine," my stepfather added.

"Besides, you won't be gone too long. You'll need to be back before your birthday," Mom noted wistfully.

"Why?" Now I knew she wasn't feeling well. My mother hadn't remembered my birthday, well, ever.

"It's an important one. We should spend it as a family. Now leave me," she said with a dramatic wave of her hand.

Jillian and I retreated to the kitchen. A large pile of dishes, thick with grime, sat in the sink. I turned on the faucet, grabbed a sponge and began to scrub.

"What do you want for dinner?" I asked Jillian.

She shrugged, picking up a towel. She half-dried a dish and put it back where she'd found it.

"What's really going on?" I asked her. "Why were you acting like a nut case earlier?"

"Whatever," she started. "They begged me to keep you away from the house after school today, which was seriously annoying. Of course, they're always concerned about you and what might happen to you," she said, with disdain.

"Jill, that doesn't answer my question," I said, trying to keep her focused.

“They wouldn’t tell me why.” She had near-permanent dark circles under her eyes. She’d had them since childhood. Now they were more pronounced because of her dyed-black hair and black glasses. The combination made her look constantly tired. “Listen, Gram needs help. You should go.”

“What about you?” I said.

“I can deal with Mom and her ‘illness’. You know it’ll probably turn out to be more of her melodrama,” Jillian said.

“I could do with a lot more mellow and a lot less drama,” I said, nudging her with my elbow.

“I could do without listening to her constantly worrying about you. God forbid the Golden Child catches something,” Jillian continued. “Please, just go.”

“Alright, but I’m not the Golden Child.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Just slightly bronzed,” I said, teasingly.

I smiled and nudged her again. She didn’t smile back.

Jillian

After Marc and I ate dinner, I tiptoed quietly up the stairs, glancing back one last time to make sure my mother and stepfather were still in the den. They were always together. They’d been married almost two years. The honeymoon phase should be over already. I rolled my internal eye dramatically. Whatever.

My mother had moved her sickbed from the bedroom to the den to “be closer to nature.” She insisted it helped her heal. I didn’t understand how that got her closer to nature. It just got her closer to the television. It didn’t matter to me. For once, something actually worked in my favor. Now I had chance to see what they were up to.

I quietly headed toward my parent’s room at the end of the hall.

Marc’s door was diagonal from their room. It was open a crack. I paused and watched him through the sliver. He tucked a sock into the corner of his suitcase. It fit perfectly. He approached packing the way he approached life. He was thoughtful, meticulous and deliberate. He was infuriatingly perfect. No wonder Mom liked him better.

I was a disappointment. When I was a child, she wanted me to take etiquette classes and wear frilly dresses. I wanted to roll around in the mud and color my Barbie’s hair black.

Marc was perfect from the start. He drew her sweet pictures when he was young. Later, he helped with the laundry and the cooking. The worst part was he did it just to be nice. So annoying. The more he did, the less I wanted to do.

I checked my desire to walk straight into his room and dump his bag on the floor. Instead I continued down the hall. I had to figure out what was going on. Sure, it was much easier just not to care. I did that well. But something was strange about this whole situation. It nagged at me. I couldn’t ignore it. Trust me, I tried.

I opened the door to my parent's room. It squeaked loudly. Or maybe I imagined it. I was secretly terrified of getting caught. My parents were clear: I should never go into their room without permission.

Most kids were grounded for breaking the rules. I wasn't like most kids, though. I could get turned into a toad. OK, maybe not a toad. But my parents could definitely do something much scarier than ground me.

I stopped to make sure no one heard me and then closed the door gently behind me.

The long wood dresser was covered with creams and lotions. It looked like the desk of a mad scientist. I pushed a few bottles aside to clear a small space. Quickly, I assembled the ingredients.

My hand shook as I poured a mixture of sand and salt into a small wooden cup. Inside I placed a pinch of homemade incense. My fumbling fingers sparked a match and dropped it in the cup. The pungent odor of pine, peppermint and jasmine filled the room. A thin stream of smoke twisted up toward the ceiling.

I took a practice breath to steady my nerves. This was a big spell for me. With my luck, it would set the room on fire instead of showing the last time magic was used. Nothing ever went my way.

I breathed in again. This time I inhaled the plume of smoke. I tried not to cough. Then I closed my eyes and concentrated on connecting with the elements. Heat entered through my toes first, then my fingers. Air danced across my skin. My spell was based in fire and air. So far, so good.

Of course, at any moment, the spell could still backfire and turn me to dust. Part of me wished it would. Being in this family was hard. I had a perfect brother, a self-centered mother, an emotionally absent stepfather and then there was the witch thing. It was a big secret. My friends couldn't know. Marc couldn't know. He didn't have powers yet. So I had to hide my witchy-ness even in my own house. Being a witch in suburbia was complicated and lonely. Bottom line, it sucked.

I whispered words of the spell. As I spoke, smoke wafted out of my mouth.

"Tem poris spaca," I said.

The smoke expanded and thickened, like a fog. My body trembled. It worked. I couldn't believe it. I'd performed small spells. Some worked, some didn't. In Wiccan years, I was still practically a baby and it took effort to practice. So I didn't do it much. In our Wiccan tribe, called the Aradnians, we get our powers when we're seventeen. It's called our Awakening. It was a dumb name. Whatever. The worst part was that we couldn't even know we're witches until we were seventeen. It was a stupid rule. I didn't know much about other tribes but if they didn't have that rule, I'd convert.

The fog moved with purpose. It coated the room with a thin gray film, except in one place. The place the last spell was cast. It was a space on the floor next to the bed. It had a distinct shape—an exact five point star.

Suddenly the door swung open.

“What are you doing?” my stepfather, Benjamin, said, through gritted teeth.
I gulped.

Chapter 2

Dagny

I stood frozen in the hallway of the morgue. I needed to actually hear the words to know it was true.

“What do you mean, she’s gone? She’s dead?” I demanded.

My anxious words were met with silence. I tried to follow the crumbs of memories to the candy house. Pulling an old memory from the far recesses of my mind, I recalled some veiled references to people who wanted us dead. “Abominations” was the term I remembered most clearly. As soon as I got close to the memory it disappeared, as if a door was suddenly shut and locked. The memory was behind it.

“Yes,” my father whispered. It was barely audible.

“We need to get out of here,” Jason stated, coolly.

He stood with his back straight and legs spread, systematically scanning our surroundings for any number of hidden enemies. He would have looked like a poster-child for the Army if not for the wisps of boyish curls at his temples that gave away his age. In fact he reminded me of someone from a movie. The Termite. No. The Destructor. No, it wasn’t that. Oh, it was so frustrating not being able to remember even the simplest things.

The echo of shuffling feet reverberated down the corridor.

“Hey—who’s down there?” a ghostly silhouette called out. But this was no ghost. He was the night man on duty. If there were any horror movie characters here, they were us.

“What you people doin’?” The night watchman’s voice cracked with confusion and fear. We were likely very frightening with our white, translucent glow, replete with re-animated veins and capillaries throbbing beneath our skin.

“Dad, we have to go,” my sister whispered.

My father’s posture snapped into shape.

Without another word, we sprinted down the hall. Our bare feet pounded against the hard tile until we skidded to a stop at a T-intersection. Without thinking, I turned right. Jason followed. Ava and Dad went left.

The night watchman’s footfalls echoed close behind. Jason shot me an anxious glance as we rounded another corner. I spotted the outline of a rectangle in the blackness.

“Door,” I whispered.

The silver handle glowed like a beacon. We rushed into the room, slammed the door behind us and threw our weight against it.

Seconds later, the watchman banged loudly against the door. He yanked down the handle and thrust it forward. The door opened a crack. Jason and I slammed it shut again.

“Can we lock it?” I asked.

“No,” he barked, staring at the lockless door.

Pressing my back against the door, I took stock of our options. Long metal tables held a few freshly dead bodies under the cover of crisp white sheets. The outlines of the corpses bobbed up and down like a skyline of rolling, snow-covered hills. At the other end of the room I spied our only means of escape: another door.

“You hold the door while I hide on one of the empty tables,” I directed. “Then you go for that door. He’ll follow you. I’ll creep out after he’s gone.”

“That is a negative.”

“You can outrun him. I can’t,” I explained.

Jason didn’t move. He was not convinced.

“You have a better idea?” I challenged.

“Can you use...?”

Suddenly, the night watchman shoved the door open again cutting Jason’s question short. Jason flung his body back against it and closed it with a loud grunt.

“Don’t you think I would have if I could?” I snapped.

I was alert. But my body was not yet fully connected to my mind or my powers. If we had been completely healed, we would’ve had no trouble escaping.

“Me either,” he sighed, then offered a begrudging, “Go.”

I leaped onto one of the tables and pulled the sheet over myself. Once covered, I heard Jason move an object in front of the door.

The night watchman yelled and pounded as he tried to force the door open.

“Open this door. I’m calling the police. Is this a joke?” he threatened.

I wish.

Jason slipped through the back door just as the barricade screeched across the floor. The success of my plan hinged on the night watchman spying Jason’s exit and following him. I held my breath and waited to find out if my plan worked.

The sound of his sneakers shuffling around the room answered my question and sent my heart beating like a war drum. The watchman did not follow Jason. Instead, he was examining the bodies on the tables.

Before I knew it, it was my turn. A draft of air swept along the length of my body as my sheet lifted upwards. My one advantage was I still looked like a corpse. Now I had to act like one.

The night watchman held the sheet for what felt like an eternity. My lungs ached as I waited for him to let it fall. But he didn’t.

It would be impossible to stave off the burn of my lungs much longer. A gasp escaped my lips and my eyes involuntarily shot open. The night watchman withdrew in shock. His hand trembled and the cloth shook. But he didn’t release it.

I held still. Somewhere in the back of my mind was the knowledge that it was normal for dead bodies to release gases or spontaneously open their eyes. Surely if he'd worked here long enough he would know that, wouldn't he?

As the seconds ticked by, my mind was wild with speculation. Had he seen me in the hall earlier? Would he know my face? I stared straight and didn't move a muscle.

Preventing myself from blinking was almost as hard as preventing myself from breathing. I wouldn't be able to hold off both biological reflexes much longer.

In my peripheral vision, I saw his shaking arm move slowly toward me. He placed a single finger on my neck, as if to check my pulse, and quickly retracted it. My lungs again threatened to burst open. The dry air in my eyes would soon force me to blink.

I couldn't fool him twice.

There was a sudden crash outside the room. Quickly, he dropped the sheet and ran off toward the sound. Gasping, I jumped off the table.

Carefully and quietly, I tiptoed back to the location where our family split. Down the hallway my father and Ava had chosen, I spied a glowing red "Exit" sign. That was the direction I had to go. There was no choice. Taking in a deep breath, I did the only thing I could do, run.

My chest burned from exhaustion and fear when I threw open the heavy outer door. Rain poured down and lightning streaked across the sky. Thunder cracked. Ava pressed herself against the wall of the building, trying to stay dry under a small overhang. Jason looked up for only a second to acknowledge my existence. Water dripped down his face. He didn't even seem to notice the rain.

"It's about time," he said, tersely.

The Terminator . A moment of clarity, finally.

Jillian

Benjamin closed the door. My chest tightened with fear. He didn't look like much to humans. But he had power. He could hurt me. I stepped back, instinctively. We lived in the same house. Still I barely knew the guy, even after almost two years. I didn't know what he would do to me. Without taking his eyes off me, he walked over and opened a window. I was too terrified to speak. The smoke funneled out of the room and, slowly, the air cleared. The door was only a few feet away. I wanted to run but I couldn't. This man was corrupting my mother. She would never have done something like this before she met him. My mother was many things but she didn't break the rules. She loved rules and pomp and circumstance. I summoned my courage and my anger.

"I saw what you did," I snapped, accusingly.

"What did I do?" he asked. His tone was too calm.

"The revealing magic spell showed me the pentagram. It means you did a spell that used five points. You had to use all the elements and blood. The *Libri Dea* forbids using blood in spells. It's dangerous. It's wrong."

“The *Libri Dea* also tells us to kill Possessors,” he responded, arching his left eyebrow. “For something like that, you need blood.”

“Wait, what? You and Mom killed a Possessor? How?” I was stunned.

How was this possible? Sure the Aradnian book of magic, called the *Libri Dea*, said Possessors were very dangerous. They possessed the bodies of people and killed their souls. But it was supposed to be nearly impossible to find a Possessor, let alone kill one. Only very powerful Wiccans even tried. Since when was my mother a powerful witch? She used spells to make frown lines disappear, not people.

“Your mother is stronger than you think. She comes from a very ancient line of witches. Her blood, like yours and your brother’s, can have great power. You probably never knew that. Your father wasn’t interested in magic. He wanted to live like a human. Your mother never explored her magical side with him. That was a mistake.”

“So what? It’s still dangerous. Blood spells are banned for a reason. They take a lot of power. If you use that much power, there is always a price. You may not pay it but someone or something else will. And they can go wrong, anything could happen,” I said, reciting the warnings from the *Libri Dea*.

He stared at me, like he was waiting for something. Then I realized.

“That’s why you didn’t want Marc here this afternoon. He’s not seventeen yet. He might see something he shouldn’t.”

My Stepfather nodded. He almost looked proud.

“And Mom’s not really sick. She’s drained from the spell because it takes so much power,” I continued.

“She’ll be fine in a day or two,” he said, taking a step toward me. He looked at me differently. Was that respect in his eyes? “You are more perceptive than I realized. Or maybe you’re more deceptive. I thought you didn’t care about magic. And then you just did a relatively advanced spell. You definitely inherited your mother’s talent.”

“If you succeeded, or whatever, why are you sending Marc away?” I asked.

“Because we’re not stopping,” he said. He moved closer. His amber-colored eyes narrowed. My courage drained away. “Possessors travel in packs like dogs. We have their scent now. It’s a matter of time before we find the next one. We’re going to get them all. You could help us. I see promise in you. I’m now very interested to see what happens with your brother.”

Of course, it always comes back to Marc. I’m the older one but I’m never first. Whatever. If my stepfather didn’t turn me into a toad, I would go back to not caring again. I exhausted my caring quota for the month anyway.

“What about Gram. Did she really break her hip?”

“She didn’t. Marc will find out she’s fine when he gets there. We’ll figure out a way to keep him out there until he turns seventeen.”

He put his cold hand on my arm.

“Now let’s talk about your punishment.”

Jason

We arrived at a small motel close to the airport. It was hidden behind a gas station, a good strategic location. The rooms ran along an outdoor hallway, which faced away from the main street. The rooms had only one exit. This was good for surveillance. Unfortunately, it also limited escape routes.

Our mother booked the motel room yesterday, as part of our typical preparations. Yesterday seemed like an eternity ago, even for someone as old as I. Yesterday, we were different people and she was still alive. Yesterday was gone now.

I swallowed hard and pushed down the mucous gathering in my throat. That was the closest I would come to crying. There was no time for sorrow. I would find the witches who killed her and make them pay. First, I had to get Dagny to the new house safely.

My father went into the motel office alone. Ava and Dagny watched him through the dirty window. I watched everything else.

It was dark. Even though it was late, Los Angeles was a large city and cars still zoomed by on the road. I wanted to get inside as quickly as possible. Darkness was unsafe.

Dad emerged from the office and we all walked silently to the room. He opened the door. Inside it smelled of ammonia and mothballs.

“Oh, that’s awful,” Ava said. She turned her head toward the open door with disgust and covered her nose. “Thank God I’m not staying here.”

Dagny walked in and looked around.

“It’s not that bad,” she said.

Dagny ran her left hand absently across the dresser and then opened a door at the far end of the room. “Bathroom looks clean. I think I’m going to take a shower,” she said.

“Please do,” said Ava. She looked Dagny up and down, disapprovingly. Dagny’s hair was tangled. Her t-shirt and jeans were wrinkled and far too big for her. Ava had already combed her hair into a bun and put on a perfectly starched polo shirt and long khaki skirt.

Dagny looked at Ava defiantly.

“Actually, I’m kind of hungry,” Dagny said. “Dad, I saw a vending machine down the hall. I’m going to go grab something.”

She started for the door.

“Wait,” said Dad. “You don’t have any money.”

“I don’t need money,” Dagny said, with a wink.

“Dagny, we are not criminals.” He took a dollar out of his pocket.

“Well, we just stole four dead bodies from a morgue and clothes and money from a bunch of people at a gym,” Dagny said. “If that’s not criminal behavior, I’m not sure what is.”

“That was necessary for survival,” Dad responded.

He handed her the dollar.

“So is chocolate,” she said as she walked out of the room.

“Dagny, no junk food,” Ava snapped, peaking her head out into the hallway.

Dagny turned briefly and said, “I don’t think the vending machine carries fresh fruit.” Then she continued down the hall.

I stood in the doorway with one foot in the hall and one foot in the room so I could closely monitor Dagny. Ava and my father hovered near me inside. The vending machine was several yards away, pushed up against the side of the motel. It was close enough for me to see Dagny but far enough away that she couldn’t hear us talking.

“I’ll have to worry about her terrible eating habits later,” Ava whispered. “When Dagny comes back, hopefully she will still want to shower. When she’s in there, we can quickly perform the spell and then I can go to the airport.”

Dagny reached the vending machine. She put the tip of the dollar in the slot. It sucked it in and spit it back out.

“Then you and Jason will go to the airport,” Dad corrected.

“No, Jason is going to stay here and take Dagny on the plane once I’ve made the house safe,” Ava said. She didn’t discuss this with me or Dad. She assumed we would agree.

Typically, before Traveling to new bodies, we made several key plans. We picked the bodies and the morgue. We identified a place to obtain clothes and money quickly. We booked a motel near an airport. We determined a location for our new home and purchased a house or apartment. Then, almost immediately after Traveling, Ava and I went to the new house together to prepare it with protective spells. Dagny and our mother came when it was safe. Our father was last. He stayed around to make sure our sudden resurrection had no lasting consequences.

“No,” Dad said. “It will take longer to prepare the new house with just one person. That will delay Dagny’s arrival. She is virtually unprotected here. I would rather she spend a few hours alone on a plane than risk several extra days or weeks in a location we cannot properly secure.”

Dagny was still at the vending machine. She rubbed the dollar against the glass to smooth it out. Then she put it in again. It spit it back out.

“You and Jason will be with her,” Ava argued.

“Ava, your mother was just killed,” Dad argued, calmly. “I realize none of us are ready to talk about that quite yet. However, we cannot ignore it completely. I cannot adequately protect a motel room and keep Dagny safe. Someone may notice the strange odors and symbols burned onto the floors. We need to get her to the new house as quickly as possible.”

“Then you take her,” Ava said, sharply, to Dad.

“We were seen by the night watchman. I cannot come until I am sure that has not aroused suspicion,” Dad explained, maintaining his even tone.

“He saw us clearly. That is a step we can’t skip,” I said, agreeing with Dad. Ava shot me a sour look. “Why doesn’t Dad take Dagny to the airport? He can drop her at the gate. I will be at the gate in Virginia to pick her up. She will only be alone for the time she is on the plane. She can’t get into that much trouble in five or so hours.”

“Jason, just last week she turned her friend’s hair blue because the girl said she wanted to try it. That was not easy to cover up,” Ava said.

“Ava, we do not have many options. I believe Jason’s suggestion is the best. It is what we will do,” Dad said.

Dagny tried the dollar again and the machine kicked it out. She turned around to see if someone was watching. I ducked back into the room so she wouldn’t see me watching her and peered out.

She turned back and waved her hand across the glass of the vending machine. The coil turned and a candy bar dropped into the dispenser. She stuck her hand in and pulled it out. She did it with barely a thought. I couldn’t do that, not yet or not ever, at least not as easily.

She opened the wrapper and turned on her heel, heading back toward the room.

“She’s coming,” I said. “So, we agree?”

Ava pulled on the bottom of her shirt, indicating she did not agree but would not argue. My father nodded.

“Now we should focus on the spell,” Dad said. “If we want to keep her safe, we need to do this well.”

Dagny came back to the room. She had already finished the candy bar and was licking her fingers.

“Dagny, you have chocolate all over your hands and face,” Ava said, shaking her head.

Dagny scowled and went to the bathroom. She closed the door. A moment later the shower turned on.

“Let’s do this before she’s done,” Ava said.

We held hands in a circle and concentrated. It was a difficult spell and we were still new to these bodies. We were also missing a key member of our family. I wasn’t sure if, without my mother, the spell would be as powerful.

We closed our eyes. The air started to hum and crackle.

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