

Chapter 1

“You’ve got to be shitting me.”

“I shit you not, Riley, I shit you not.”

I shake my head, giving a slight chuckle. “You know, ever since I got to DC, my mind’s been blown so often I’m surprised I’ve got any brains left, but this really takes the cake. Never imagined my first actual-factual assignment would be a *Night at the Museum* remake.”

The leather in the standard black SUV creaks as I shift my weight, trying to get comfortable. The freshly-issued Supernatural Cases Division credentials that label me as Agent 6 are tucked into my starched black suit jacket pressing against my sidearm. Both badge and gun seem heavier than they really are. I haven’t quite decided which one makes me more nervous yet.

In the driver’s seat, Agent 21 laughs right back at me. “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, rookie,” she says.

I roll my eyes extra sarcastically, and she grins, flashing pointed canines that are hyper-white against her perpetual tan. I relax a bit.

I’ve been shadowing Sofi Strella almost a month now, and it’s taking a bit of adjustment from the strict discipline of FBI basic at Quantico to this loose, buddy-cop style of training. If I’d so much as thought about being snarky with the instructors, there’d be hell to pay. With Sofi, it’s mandatory. She’s nearly a decade younger than I am, but man, has that girl got a mouth on her. Which is fine by me. Makes me feel like maybe I’m not totally insane to think we’re friends, something more than an official co-worker relationship. Hard to tell, though. Those particular skills are rusty after fifteen years of disuse. Small town like mine, high school friends are for life — not a lot of opportunity to practice making new ones. But I’m taking it as a good sign that Sofi and I have been reprimanded four times for giggling during briefings. Turns out, we’re a decent team, too. Between her year of SCD experience and bountiful street-smarts and

my weird affinity for paperwork and mental mythological encyclopedia, we've already gotten positive nods from brass.

Seems like I'm off to a running start in this new life, much to my competitive, perfectionist delight.

Although...

I assumed I'd be assigned to Jack Alexander — excuse me, *Agent 97* — once I finished my mundane service, seeing as he's the one who dragged me here in the first place. And is the only other person on the planet who shares my powers.

That seems to have been a silly, romantic pipe dream, though. They attached me to Sofi the day I transferred, citing compatible psych evals; I haven't seen or heard from Jack since July. Not an email, not a phone call, not even a memo to make good on his promise of sidestepper training. Zilch. For all I know, he's gone back to being another boring old suit, a weird, skinny man tucked away in a dark office, shuffling papers and not giving a shit about anyone else.

Not that I've been great about trying to contact him, either, if I'm being fair. A friendly text or two, a couple unanswered calls. But I got the message quick enough: He's either forgotten about me or doesn't think I'm worth his time. I let myself be furious for a while, maybe even a little ashamed for wanting to see what, if anything, is between us. Then I sunk any leftover feelings into twenty weeks of gruelling FBI training and got over it.

Or at least I thought I did.

After my first day in Washington, Sofi took me to The Fifth Amendment for a celebratory beer, and he walked past the big picture window. He didn't see me, but I sure saw him. Suited up, squeaky clean, eyes hyper-focused, mind obviously elsewhere. I almost barfed from shock. Nearly up and ran after him, too, but Sofi coming back from the bathroom kept me glued to my seat. Wasn't more than two or three seconds, but it tore the scab off pretty damn fast. Guess I'm not as healed up as I'd thought.

I sigh, clearing my tightening chest.

"Aw, sugarbean, it ain't that bad," Sofi chides me, nudging my leg for emphasis. "It'll be over soon."

Ow, my feelings.

I know she meant the case, but the juxtaposition hurts. She doesn't know about Jack — whatever our status, I've managed to keep him under my shirt. So to speak. And there's something about talking guys with your boss that just seems wrong. For all I know, there's nothing to talk about anyway.

I run a hand through my chin-length copper hair, letting the squeak of the windshield wipers carry away my internal pity-party along with the puffy snowflakes. I don't think about all the other secrets I've kept from her.

"Sorry. Was a million miles away," I manage to say, giving her an apologetic smile and turning my thoughts back to the case. "Not every day you're called in to investigate a real live folk hero." Pause. "Or is he still technically dead?"

"Both, I think. Fortunately, we don't have to make that call. All we have to do is find the guy, clean up the magical mess as best we can, and bring him in for processing." She takes her dark brown eyes off the slick streets for a moment. "You okay, Riley? Seriously, I'm asking," she says.

The concerned look she fixes me with generates warm fuzzies that feel more intimate than our short acquaintance probably warrants. Mamma bear powers are awesome like that. It tugs on the homesickness I've buried along with the memory of Jack's touch. But I nod and brush it aside, trying to stay focused on the present.

"Yeah, I'm good," I say. Then, with a touch of sarcasm, "I mean, I'm one more hard right from throwing up my coffee and bagel, but I'm pretty sure that's just your driving."

Sofi makes a face at the dig, but then nods knowingly, her blond ponytail bobbing. "Can't blame you for being wound up. You've been stuck in headquarters filling out forms and reading textbooks and shooting at paper targets while I'm out there cracking heads and taking names. You've got to be itching for some play."

"It's not that," I object, a bit faster than I mean to. "I'm fine with studying and research. It's what I'm good at. But I'm the new guy, and I don't want to screw this up, you know?"

Sofi shrugs. "I wouldn't worry about it. Everyone's first case is a shit show. Get it out of the way, move on."

I groan. That is so not what I need to hear right now. I slump against the seat, pressing into the headrest and looking angstily up at the ceiling.

"Please tell me yours wasn't that bad."

“Oh my god, yeah it was,” Sofi says emphatically. “My first case, I had to detain a selkie that’d come up in the tidal basin and left his skin draped over the feet of the Jefferson Memorial. Kids were poking the thing with a stick and asking their parents awkward questions. Agent 50 was my mentor, and he sent me in by myself. Got sort of a ‘sink or swim’ approach to rookies. I did okay, didn’t upset any of the mundanes, but I seriously couldn’t stop staring at the guy’s crotch while I questioned him.” She laughs. “Selkie dudes are *hung*.”

The bizarre pornographic image sears my mental retinas.

“Sofi!” I squeal, only half as scandalized as I sound.

“What? It’s true! Don’t lose your sense of humor just because you’re The Man now, Riley. It’ll keep you sane.”

I shake my head and chuckle, turning my attention out the window. The thin morning light of December gives the National Mall a haunted feel. When I first got here, it was summer, and the lawn was thronged with joggers, picnickers, tourists, and protesters. Winter’s turned the place into a lonely expanse of snow bordered by empty buildings.

Our school never took the field trip to the Capitol that bigger towns offer their seniors, so I’m discovering the city for the first time outside a Civics textbook. I hate to admit it, but I think I love it more than New York. I’ve only been to three major cities in my life, but still. This place, my adopted city, combines the charm of my home town with the energy of my dream town. There’s something about the history of Washington underpinned with an abundance of culture and art, laced with an odd small-town vibe for such a busy city. Its spirit creeps into the soles of my feet as I walk my neighborhood, around headquarters, through museums, along the metro.

Sofi cranks the SUV down Constitution, and the brown stone edifice of the Smithsonian Natural History Museum lumbers into view. She shimmies through the side lot and into the back without so much as a glance from site security, carefully inching the vehicle’s massive rear end up to the loading dock. Which seems like a weird place to park. I raise an eyebrow as Sofi pulls the keys from the ignition.

“Never know what shape he’ll be in,” she explains. “We might have to shovel the dude into the trunk.”

I almost ask but stop myself. There's no way this can be worse than the crime scene photos from that wendigo case. I didn't know people bent that way.

Sofi hops out of the car, shoving the keys into her pocket with one hand and tightening her ponytail with the other. I pause for a moment to relish the sensation of being alone for a few seconds. The nonstop people and action since I left home is taking its toll on my introverted, country-girl psyche, but there's no sign of it letting up anytime soon. The SCD's overrun with fresh incidents, nationwide — even the old hands are raising eyebrows — and everyone's in the field, from the top to the bottom. I have to take my peace where I can get it.

A knock on the rear window shatters the blissful silence, and Sofi says something I can't understand. I'm not sure if it's the safety glass in the way or if my hearing's going. It hasn't quite been the same since Azrael bloodied my eardrums in the underworld. I wave Sofi off and scoot out the door.

Right into a puddle of disgusting brown city slush. I swear loudly as my completely impractical, uniform-regulated black pumps soak through. You see all those lady detectives on TV and think there's no way they'll actually make you wear such stupid shoes in real life police work, but they do. I make a note to see how long I can get away with shined-up military boots starting tomorrow.

"Watch out for that puddle, Riley," Sofi says.

"Gee, thanks. Why couldn't they have paired me with a psychic?"

She grins as I pick my way around other treacherous puddles to meet her at the stairs leading up to the museum's employee entrance. "Sorry, spookybutt," she says, pulling out a pair of shades and sliding them on. "You're stuck with Mama Bear."

"Fine," I sigh, reaching for my own shades. "As long as you don't give me a spit bath, I guess I can live with that."

"Only if you ask real nice."

"Only if you buy me dinner first."

Sofi rolls her eyes and takes a step back to inspect me. We're measurably the same petite height, but she carries herself with such absolute physical confidence that I feel tiny in comparison. I let her brush a speck of lint off my suit jacket, then she purses her lips thoughtfully, giving her a *Project Runway* sort of pout. I play along and give a little turn with my arms out and my nose in the air.

“I’m ready for my close-up, Miss Strella.”

Sofi snorts. “Alright, I guess you are,” she says. “Radar up?”

The smile melts off my face faster than the ice in my shoes. I was so wrapped up in thinking about Jack and Sofi and the case and the city that I totally forgot why I’m out here in the first place.

As a sidestepper, it’s my job to check for doorways between the mortal world and the Otherworld to ensure that our “person of interest” didn’t arrive or doesn’t escape that way. The uptick in missing persons reports has both the FBI and SCD extra concerned about accidental interworld travel, including the possibility that someone or something is tearing new, unstable portals in the Gauntlet. Background magic levels have nearly doubled since last year, and it’s got to be coming from somewhere. Thus, my field debut two months before the average SCD rookie would see action.

Which is what’s got me nervous about my first real case. Not the early promotion – the mundane stuff is easy. Top of my class in procedure and forensics, thank you very much. It’s that no one else knows why it’s so supernaturally crazy right now, despite glaring signs that the balance between worlds is horribly off. No one knows about Eris. But I haven’t breathed a word to anyone about what I know, not even to Sofi. Jack was supposed to take the information to the top and start things moving. But as far as I can tell, he hasn’t done shit.

That’s not even the worst thing, though, here in this moment. No, the worst thing is that between the insanity of FBI boot camp and trying to keep a lid and eye on the supernatural world losing its shit, I haven’t so much as tried to raise my energy in months. Not so much as a sensor circle to check for doorways. Haven’t had time. And even if I did, I’m not trained – Jack’s ghost act biting me in the ass yet again. I’ve got no idea what’ll happen when I use my powers in the real world as opposed to the already-magical underworld. There are so many stories of heroes losing their gifts after returning to mundane life, after they’ve healed themselves and completed their quest, that I’m not sure my powers will even work.

I must be screwing up my face something awful because Sofi peers meaningfully at me over the top of her shades, the look of a parent noticing their child’s about to throw an epic tantrum in the cereal aisle.

“Everything okay?” she asks.

I exhale sharply to force out the poisonous self-doubt, smiling in what I hope is a convincing way. Shooting for a “nervous, untested rookie” look instead of a “paranoid about the end of the world and not sure if I can still use my powers” one.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” I reassure her. “Just been a while since I had to use magic instead of a pen or a gun.”

There’s a continued, unspoken question in Sofi’s eyes, but I ignore it.

I draw a lungful of the heavy, freezing air to ground myself, then shut my eyes in concentration. An evil thought burbles up from the darkness of my mind, drawing on my fears.

You’re nothing without his help.

The condemnation’s met with a rush of anger that burns a path for a burst of electric blue power that erupts at the crown of my head. It must not be visible; Sofi doesn’t make a sound. A familiar tingle shoots from my scalp all the way to my frozen toes and back in a long, invigorating circuit that extinguishes both the fear and the anger, centering itself into a peaceful ball under my ribcage.

Relieved I’m still magical but worried about killing the charge by trying too hard, I gingerly inch the power out from my body. First a few feet, then a few yards, stretching out and erecting the interworld doorway radar in one fluid movement. The edge of the completed circle hangs like an invisible hoop skirt around my midsection. The whole thing takes less than a minute, and the integrity is perfect. A far cry from the nuclear blast of that first attempt behind the doorfield.

Ha. Take that, I say to the nasty, doubting voice. *I don’t need his help.*

I wait a beat or two while my elevated consciousness travels the perimeter of the circle, looking for Otherworld passages. Something erratic or glowing or sucking or overcharged. But nothing pings. If there are any doors, permanent or accidental, they’re not within a block radius of us.

I open my eyes one at a time, taking care to leave enough focus channeled into the sensor circle to hold it up, just in case. Sofi’s watching me patiently.

“Nothing,” I report with a shrug. “If this guy really is up and walking around, he’s still on this side.”

“Roger that.”

Sofi pushes her glasses back up her nose, tightens her ponytail, and knocks sharply on the rear entrance three times. To me, she says, “Ready for your big debut, rookie?”

Footsteps coming towards us from inside the building say I don’t have a choice. I nod with a lopsided grin. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“That’s my girl,” she says, returning the smile briefly before replacing it with the stone-neutral mask of official business.

As the wet metal door creaks open and we step inside, I find myself wishing her words had come from someone else’s lips.

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