

# HIGH JINX

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KELLEY ARMSTRONG



## CHAPTER ONE

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"OOH, THIS DOLL DEFINITELY LOOKS CURSED," Hope says from across the shop where she's glued to my laptop, surfing eBay.

When I don't respond, she turns the laptop around. "Don't you think it looks cursed, Kennedy?"

"Bookmark it," I say. "Right now, I'm a little busy with this mirror, which is *definitely* cursed."

We're in my antiques shop, which has been open for a month. It's mid-June, and I'm madly preparing for full-blown tourist season in Unstable, the little town where Hope and I live with our older sister, Ani.

Turani, Kennedy and Hope Bennett. Yep, our parents named us after famous curses, fitting for a family of curse weavers. At least half the items in my shop are formerly hexed objects. That's my specialty. In Boston, I'd hidden the "formerly cursed" part. In Unstable, it's a selling point.

Right now, I'm trying to get this tabletop mirror uncursed before the shop opens. I've already had three people knock on the window. I'm considering investing in drapes. Luckily, in a town like Unstable, nothing intrigues people more than a shrouded store window.

Hope walks up behind me and reaches for the sheet covering the mirror. I catch her hand. "Uh-uh."

"But I want to see."

"No."

"You looked. What did you see?"

I don't answer. I try to focus on the mirror again, listening for the music of the curse.

"Kennedy?" she says. "What did you see?"

I glower at her.

She sets her hands on her hips. "I don't see why you're removing the curse. It's a great tourist draw. A mirror that emphasizes your greatest flaw."

"Yeah, and only someone who looks like you wants to see that, Hopeless."

She rolls her eyes. "I already know what I'd see. My skin. I thought I'd stop getting zits when I turned twenty. No longer a teen, right?"

"It doesn't work that way."

"Did for you. Oh, wait. You *never* got zits. Anyway, if I already know my biggest flaw, what's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that there's a difference between knowing it and seeing it magnified a hundred times. Your skin is fine. The problem is in your head. So now you want to see what's in your head actually showing on your face? No one needs that. It's a nasty little hex, and I'm getting rid of it."

She's quiet for a moment as she leans against a butler's desk.

"What did you see?" she asks, her voice softer now, concerned.

Nothing. That's what I saw.

I imagine telling Hope that. She'd tease me about thinking I'm perfect if I didn't see any exaggerated flaws. It's not that. I literally saw nothing. I looked into this cursed mirror, and there was no me, and I'm not sure how to interpret that. I'd panicked, as if I were looking into a scrying ball for my future and seeing none. That isn't it. That can't be it. It's just a hex.

It's the sort of curse I specialize in—a joker's jinx—though personally, I'd say this one edges closer to a misanthrope's malice. I

like my jinxes fun. Light-hearted pranks. This one bears the sharp teeth of cruelty, and I have no time for that bullshit.

I keep telling myself that's why I don't see my reflection—as a weaver who specializes in the jinx, I see through it. Like on April Fools' Day, I saw through other kids' pranks and exposed the cruel ones, and the bullies who liked their jokes nasty stopped trying to play them on me. Pouted and said I was no fun, no fun at all. Which always made my friends laugh. Kennedy Bennett, no fun? There's a reason I specialize in jinxes. I was the class clown, the carefree girl who adored a good prank, even if it was played on her. I just don't like cruel jokes, and so maybe this mirror is like those bullies, pouting and refusing to show me anything in its reflective surface.

A good theory. And I don't believe it for a second.

"I saw *your* chin on *my* face." I shudder as I rise from crouching before the mirror. "The stuff of nightmares."

"We have the same chin, K."

"Huh. Really?" I tap mine. "Looks better on me, though."

She raises a middle finger.

I lift the shrouded mirror. "Open the storage room. This hex is going to take a while to uncure, and you are not going to let me concentrate."

She opens the door. "Because I want to see myself in it first."

I set the mirror inside and shut the door. Then I take the key ring from my pocket and wave it before locking the door. "Good luck with that, kiddo."

"Spoilsport."

"I know. I am no fun. No fun at all." I head for the sales counter. "Now, show me this doll."

Hope specializes in cursed dolls the way I specialize in cursed antiques. Her actual weaver specialty is the lover's lament, colloquially known as the ex-hex. As for the dolls, that would be my fault.

Hope is five years younger than me, and as a proper big sister—and a proper middle child—I'd done my best to terrify her. I'd tell her stories about cursed objects, especially dolls. Contrary child that

she was, she loved it and now has a room filled with formerly cursed dolls. And I have four of them in my shop.

I'm still not quite sure how that happened. When I'd been low on stock, Hope insisted I take a few of her least favorite dolls on consignment. They'd sold within two days. I'm still half-convinced she hired the buyers. I mean, who the hell walks into an antique shop, sees a creepy old doll with glass eyes that follow you across the room, and says, "I want that in *my* house!" Apparently, a lot of people, at least the sort who visit Unstable.

So I now have four truly creepy dolls whose eyes follow *me* everywhere. And I have a summer employee, in my sister, who somehow went from "Can you sell these old dolls of mine on consignment?" to spending her days here, which wouldn't be so bad if she didn't also expect a paycheck.

When I move to the laptop, I resist the urge to pick up my phone and casually glance at my messages.

*Expecting a text, Kennedy?*

No, not at all.

*Wait, you weren't checking to see whether Aiden read your last message, were you?*

Ha-ha, no. That's not me. I pop off dozens of texts a day, whether to my sisters or friends or clients, and I never check to see whether they've been read unless it's life-or-death urgent. Yet my fingers itch to pick up my phone, and my pride slinks down into my sneakers.

I don't want to be this person. Definitely don't want to be this woman. Connolly and I aren't dating. We're friends. Have been for nearly a month. Would I like more? Yep, I won't deny it. But I'm currently under an unbreakable curse, one that will visit doom and despair on any guy who falsely claims to love me.

That should be a good thing, right? Who doesn't want a romance lie detector? The problem is that I'm not sure that's how the curse works. It might also hurt a guy who *thinks* he's interested and later realizes otherwise. Or who says he loves me and later realizes he doesn't. That's not curseworthy. It's just part of picking your way

through the minefield of romantic love, making mistakes and figuring it out as you go.

The truth is that, while the curse scares me, it's also made me slow down, and that's a good thing. If I have a life motto, it's *carpe diem*. Looking before I leap is foreign to my DNA. When it comes to Connolly, though, I want to get this right.

Therefore, I should be fine with him not rushing to answer—or even read—my texts, right? Take it slow. Don't go wild. Ease in. But he *didn't* ease in at first.

Connolly is naturally reserved, with the kind of standoffishness that can be mistaken for arrogance and ego, and in Connolly's case, that wouldn't be entirely a mistake. Yet he was different with me. He'd send the first text of the day. He'd read my response right away. No games, and I appreciated that, but now something has changed and I'm racking my brain to figure out what.

I only know that he's no longer jumping at every excuse to hang out. I invited him antiquing in New Hampshire this past weekend, and he *had* jumped. Yes, that sounded like fun. He'd clear his schedule. He knew a great spot there for dinner. Then, three hours before he was supposed to pick me up, he texted to say he couldn't make it. He didn't call. He sent a vague "something came up." Since then, he hasn't initiated a single conversation or answered a text within thirty minutes.

I should take the hint, right? Say screw him. If he's backing off, that's his loss, and it's not as if I'm sitting at home, waiting for his call.

That's what I want to say. Instead, it's like that empty mirror. I look into it, and I feel as if there's a message I should understand, and I don't. I know I didn't do anything wrong, but a little voice keeps whispering that I must have. That I did something to deserve this.

I shove my phone into my back pocket and look at the laptop screen.

My cat, Ellie, hops onto the stool. She takes one look at the doll and hops down again.

"Yep, Ellie, that is one ugly doll."

"So, cursed?" Hope says.

"Not every ugly doll is cursed."

She rolls her eyes. "It doesn't matter whether it's cursed or not. It *looks* cursed. That's what counts."

"It looks dead."

She squints at the screen. "Kind of?"

"It looks like a dead *baby*."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"Yes, kiddo. It's a bad thing." I wave at the shop. "Our clientele is people like our parents. Middle aged. Middle class. Looking for a conversation piece."

"A doll that looks like a dead baby is a conversation piece."

"Would Mom have wanted that in our living room?"

She sighs and slumps. As I pretend to tidy, I study her for a reaction to the mention of our parents. It's been five years since a care-less driver stole our father. Two years since cancer stole our mother. We are easing into a place where we can talk about them without diving into the tar pit of grief, and I am glad of that. I don't want to talk around our parents. I want to talk *about* them. Bring them to life the only way we can.

"Fine." Hope flips to another browser tab. "This one?"

"It looks possessed," I say.

"So, yes?"

"Yes, but if we don't sell it within a week, I'm turning it to face the wall for a time-out."

"Ooh, no. We should do that right away. Hang a sign warning that shoppers turn it around at their own risk."

When I don't immediately say no, she brightens.

I smile over at her. "Yes, that'd be fun."

"This is why I'm going into marketing. Ani's the oldest twenty-seven-year-old on the planet. Like a stodgy grandma. *No, Hope, you can't run a sideline hexing exes. No, Hope, you can't vlog a client's cursed objects on your TikTok. No, Hope, you can't tell people they'll be eaten by a rabid dog if they don't get Aunt Maude's tea set uncursed.*"

"Mmm, gotta agree with her on the last one."

"But you'd be fine with the first two, which is why you, dear sister, will be the benefactor of my upcoming college education. I'm going to run all my test cases using your shop. Right after I convert that corner"—she points—"into a cursed-doll gallery."

"Four dolls, kiddo. We agreed on four. No more."

I'm about to turn away when my gaze snags on the bottom of the webpage. It disappears as Hope closes the tab. I take the laptop from her and reopen it, zooming to the suggested listings. The one I thought I'd seen doesn't appear.

I type two words in the search box, and the entire page fills with results.

"Cursed paintings?" Hope says. "New sideline, K?"

I flip through the list, most of which is paintings of cats, which could mean the search engine thought that's what I mistyped . . . or it could think it means the same thing. It wouldn't be wrong. I glance at Ellie, who's contemplating sharpening her claws on a three-hundred-year-old chair.

I scroll down and click a listing. A painting of a crying girl fills the screen.

"Holy shit," I whisper.

"That isn't creepy," Hope says. "It's just depressing. You don't want that one. Here, let me—"

I smack her arm as she reaches across the keyboard. "You don't recognize it?"

"Uh, should I?"

"Salvo Costa. *Crying Girl*. The *most* famous cursed painting. Well, one of them. It was part of a quartet. All cursed."

She frowns.

"You never read Mom's curse scrapbook, did you," I say.

"Just the pages on dolls."

I sigh. "Fine. Curse history lesson, just for you, baby sister. It's the seventies. Guy paints a series of sad kids. Why? Because it's the seventies, and people ate that shit up. Or that's how it began. He only meant to paint one and have copies made. He holed up in his

studio to do this painting—*Crying Girl*. When night comes, his wife brings him dinner, and he says to leave it outside the door. Doesn't touch it. Doesn't touch breakfast, either. For three days, he drinks nothing but coffee. Lots of coffee. When he emerges, he's completed a series of four paintings, all of sad kids."

"Did anyone suggest therapy?"

"No, but when his priest saw them, he suggested an exorcism."

She peers at the screen. "It's just a crying kid."

"While they're called the sad children, this is the only one who's crying. There's a boy about thirteen who looks eerily determined. Determined to do what? That is the question. Then an older girl who looks as if she's lost her last friend in the world, and an older boy who looks as if he murdered that friend. A wee bit too demonic for the priest's taste. As for Salvo Costa, all he wanted was to get the damned things out of his house."

"But he'd just finished painting them."

I shrug. "That's the legend. He painted them and immediately wanted them gone. His art dealer took them and sold them. That's when the crying started for real."

"Let me guess. They make people cry?"

"No, they kill. Violent death and madness follow the paintings wherever they go."

"Ooh, now it gets good. It's story time, yes? Please tell me it's story time."

I lower my voice. "They say that Costa was possessed by the spirits of the four children. He and his wife had just moved into a new home. Little did they know that it harbored a dark secret."

My sister fairly vibrates with glee, and I have to bite my cheek to keep my expression suitably somber.

"An entire family died in that house," I say. "Parents and their four children. They perished in a fire. Except . . . that's not the whole story."

Hope bounces, glowing as if she's seven again, the two of us under her covers while I unspool a new ghost story.

I continue, "They say the parents died first. And it wasn't a fire. It was . . . the children."

I let that one hang for the required three seconds. "They say the oldest girl and oldest boy murdered their parents. Killed them in their sleep. For the next month, no one knew. The kids said their parents were busy, their parents were sick, their parents had just stepped out. All the while they were rotting in their beds. The youngest girl wouldn't stop crying. She missed their parents and didn't understand why she wasn't allowed in their bedroom. Then came the fire."

"Did the little girl set it?"

"That, my dear sister, is the question. Some say it was indeed the little girl. Some say it was the younger boy, the one who looks so determined in the painting, perhaps determined to punish his murderous siblings. Some say it was the older girl, and that explains her expression—she's broken by guilt and remorse. Or it's the older boy, who'd had enough of the crying and decided to stop it for good. There is another story, though. One where the youngest—the girl in this painting—escaped and ran to tell the neighbors. The neighbors came back . . . and set the house on fire. At the last minute, they pushed the little girl into the flames to perish. After all, she shared the same blood as the two who'd killed their own parents. A bad seed."

Hope gives a delicious shiver. "That's a good one."

I lean back. "I think so. Anyway, that's the origin story for the paintings, which this seller doesn't even seem to know."

"Lousy marketing."

"Right?" I scroll through the listing. "They don't seem to know there are other paintings, either."

"What about the deaths? Do the children come out of the paintings at night and kill the owners?"

"Kill them or drive them mad. Everyone who has survived insists they saw the child in their painting come to life. My guess is that the curse is actually a hallucination, causing the owner to believe they see—"

Hope sticks her fingers in her ears. "What's that? You're trying to explain away a cool story? La-la-la, I can't hear you."

I smile and shake my head. "Fine. I'll keep my theory to myself. The point is that, yes, it's widely believed that the paintings *are* actually cursed and that the curse *has* killed people. Better?"

"Much."

"And, since it's a deadly curse on an item that is for sale, I am honor-bound to buy it and uncurse it."

"Then resell it, with the full story, for double what you paid."

"That's the idea." I sign into my account. "Looks like the bidding is at a hundred bucks. Let's make it two."

## CHAPTER TWO

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I'VE LOST HOPE. Three of them, in fact. One, I keep getting outbid on that damned painting. Two, I conceded defeat in the phone-checking battle, only to discover Connolly *hasn't* read my message. Three, I've lost the actual Hope, who got a call from Ani needing her at home. Ani runs the family business: Unhex Me Here. As the name suggests, they uncurse whatever people need uncursed. Or, more often, whatever people believe they need uncursed. Ani needed Hope to handle a client trying Ani's patience, which is honestly not hard to do.

Business is brisk for a Tuesday. I've already sold three items, and I'm closing in on the sale of a doll. I may have told Hope that our clientele was mostly middle-aged antiquers, but her dolls—and my jewelry finds—pull in a different crowd: fifty percent Gen X former goths, twenty-five percent my fellow millennials and twenty-five percent Hope's fellow Gen Zs. These two fall into the last category. Trust-fund babies who think that a cursed doll is exactly what their tony Boston apartment needs. So ironic! Can you believe people actually thought it was cursed?

"So the curse has been removed," the blond one says. "You can guarantee that?"

"I can guarantee that the doll is not cursed." *Because it never was.*

"Is there a certificate or something?" Blond smirks at Brunette. "A certificate of de-cursing authentication?"

A click behind me, as Hope must come in the back door. Both young women look over.

"Well, hello," Brunette murmurs. "Please tell me *you're* for sale."

I presume she's talking about my sister. Then Blond says, "Wait, wasn't that Aiden Connolly?"

I turn so fast my sneakers squeak. I don't see Connolly. I do, however, see the storage room door swinging shut.

"That was Aiden Connolly," Blond says, her voice as breathy as if she just spotted a movie star. Which tells me two things. One, Connolly just walked in the back way and immediately turned tail and fled. Two, I was right about the background of these young women. When I called them trust-fund babies, I was kinda snarking. Seems I hit the bull's-eye because Connolly isn't a movie star . . . unless you're a society girl who's memorized Boston's most eligible bachelor lists. Connolly is on those lists. Hell, he's in the top three.

Hope has shown me the lists. At first, I thought she was creating fake ones to tease me. Oh, I know Aiden Connolly is hot. I have eyes. Also, I know he's rich. Son of a very wealthy, old-money family, and he has his own successful insurance company. But, well, he's Connolly. A little straitlaced, a little standoffish, not exactly a charming playboy. I mean, the guy runs an insurance company. He geeks out over actuarial tables. Except that kind of ambitious stability is catnip to many of the women who pore over those lists. And if they prefer the "charming playboy," well, there's always his younger brother, Rian . . . who has been secretly dating Hope for the past month.

"That was Aiden Connolly," Blond says again. "I know it was."

Her friend curls her lip as she looks around. "Here? No way."

"Yes way. I heard he's been slumming it with some . . ." Blond's gaze turns to me. "Oh my God."

I fix on my most neutral expression and pause before speaking, as if they are engaged in a personal conversation, which I hate to interrupt.

"We don't have certificates of de-cursing authenticity," I say. "However, I do offer a store guarantee. You may return the doll within three days, no questions asked."

"That *was* Aiden Connolly, wasn't it?" Blond asks.

I pause, again so politely that Ani would be proud. Then I fix on my blank shop-clerk look, the one that says I know my clients aren't addressing me.

"Hello?" Brunette says, waving her hand in front of my eyes. "We asked if that was Aiden Connolly who just came in your back door."

I glance toward the back door and frown. "Someone just dropped off a delivery. Is your friend a courier?"

I check my watch. "Oh, would you look at the time. I'm sorry, ladies. I have a video sales appointment in a few minutes. Perhaps you'd like to think on the doll a little longer?"

I raise my voice loud enough to be heard in the storage room. "Or perhaps, if that delivery guy really was your friend, you can slip out the back door and catch him."

The young women must not know Connolly personally because they don't take me up on my offer. Nor do they leave nearly fast enough, instead flouncing and whinging because I have the nerve to turn down a sale.

The pair finally leave after shooting back that if I were really selling uncursed objects, I'd offer a certificate of authenticity.

I return to my desk. Less than ten seconds later, the storage room door creaks open before swinging wide as Connolly strides in.

"That *was* you," I say, gaze on my phone as I check the cursed-painting bid.

"Yes," he says. "I left my phone in the car."

A perfectly valid excuse if you're me. If you're Connolly, it's like saying you left your right arm behind.

There's no reason for him to lie. He could admit he heard the young women recognize him and retreated because it made him uncomfortable, which is true. Plenty of guys campaign to get on

those lists. To Connolly, it's like topping the list of prize breeding bulls. Or, more accurately, top investment opportunities.

He sets something in front of me. The smell of fresh bread wafts out, and I glance up to see a picnic basket, complete with a bottle of wine.

"My apology for this weekend," he says. "I'm hoping you'll have time for a picnic, but if you don't, consider this a delivery service."

I slowly lift my gaze over the basket, which is a mistake. I said Connolly was hot. I suspect he'd find that adjective as uncomfortable as being on those lists. That doesn't mean he hides his light under a barrel. I've been told that Connolly dresses extremely well. Maybe I should have realized that myself, but male fashion isn't my thing. Hell, *female* fashion isn't really my thing, as evidenced by the fact that I'm working in a T-shirt and sneakers.

Connolly dresses as if he's heading to a GQ magazine shoot. Today, that's an ivory shirt tailored for his lean body, paired with a tie that I'm sure cost more than I'll make this week. He's on the other side of the counter, so I can't see the rest, but I'm sure it's not jeans and cowboy boots. He looks freshly shaven. Gorgeous green eyes. The exact right number of freckles scattered over his nose, as if his creator counted them out one by one.

When anyone finds fault with Connolly, it's always his hair. Not the style, which is impeccable, between fashionable and corporate, with just enough wave for flair. It's the color that puts some people off. I happen to have a thing for redheads, so yep, even this is a point in his favor.

He reaches into the basket and pulls out a tin. "I brought brownies."

When I still don't answer, he shifts, almost imperceptibly. I'm usually the one who'll swing in, basket in hand, to tease him with sweets, a temptation he avoids.

"I am sorry about the weekend," he says.

"Ah." I count two beats. "I didn't get that impression." I take out

my phone, flip to the texts and read his. "'I need to cancel this weekend. Something came up.' Nope, nothing apologetic there."

His brows knit. "Are you sure? I could have sworn I said more." He shakes his head. "My phone has been misbehaving all week. I knew I should have held off on the software upgrade."

"Ah."

Here is the quagmire of a new friendship, especially one with the potential to become romantic. If I demand an explanation, am I being needy? Scaring him off?

I hate the "scaring him off" part. It makes me sound desperate. I like Connolly because there's an amazing natural level of comfort between us. This is the opposite of that.

Screw it. If Connolly is having second thoughts—if he's feeling pressure for "slumming it" as those girls said—that isn't my problem. I don't want a friend who can be scared away by the expectation of common courtesy.

"I understand things come up," I say evenly. "But we did have a weekend planned, and I had to scramble to make alternate arrangements. That deserved more than a five-word text."

He flushes, and I struggle not to be charmed by that. Fair skin means the guy blushes easily, and it *is* charming. It's also proof that he saw my point even before I brought it up.

"I am sorry," he says. "If I didn't text more, it's because I got caught up in the situation I was resolving. That's no excuse. I should have called."

"Would you like me to stop texting you, Aiden?" I ask. "If so, just say that, please."

He frowns.

"You aren't reading my texts," I say.

"But I am. They come to my watch." He holds up his wrist. It's a gold watch with an analog face. When I arch a brow, one corner of his mouth lifts, and he taps the face to reveal a digital version.

"Fancy," I say.

"Yes, well." He clears his throat and then injects a too-bright note with, "You have told me I fuss with my phone in the car too much."

"You do."

"So I was receiving your texts, but as I planned this surprise visit, I decided not to respond until I saw you."

Maybe this should make me squirm. But it wasn't as if I was sending a dozen texts a day and freaking out when he didn't answer. It was our usual daily check-in, which he had started last month, texting me over his morning coffee each day and turning that "Good morning" into a twenty-message thread, casual back and forth as we got ready for our days, which turned into another dozen over the course of the day, more of them instigated by him than me.

I'm not being needy. I'm not being demanding. He's changing the rules to a game he started, and I don't know why.

He taps the basket. "Do you have time for a picnic lunch?"

"I have an appointment in thirty minutes. Also, I lost Hope, so I need to eat inside."

He waves at the showroom. "Let's pull up a seat then."

My phone dings. I glance down at it and sigh. Then I swipe it open, explaining with, "Bidding war."

He takes the basket to a dining table, and before I can say we can't risk scratching that, he whips a tablecloth from the basket. A white linen tablecloth. With matching napkins.

I'm still entering my bid as he sets out lunch.

"May I ask what you're buying?" he says. "If it's for the business, that is, and not personal."

"Cursed painting," I say.

"A painting you believe is cursed? Or one advertised as such?"

"Both. Salvo Costa's *Crying Girl*."

He pauses while dishing out salad. His head tilts as if accessing an inner data bank. "I don't believe I've heard of that one."

"Because it's kitschy."

I show him the photo, and he struggles against a moue of distaste that makes my lips twitch in a smile. Another ongoing mock battle of ours. His impeccable taste versus my predilection for, well, kitsch.

"Even I wouldn't hang this in my house," I say. "Sad-eyed waifs are not my thing. Now, if it was a sad-eyed puppy . . ." I catch his look. "Kidding. No sad-eyed anything. But this is part of a quartet of infamous cursed paintings." My smile fades. "Dangerously cursed."

"Fatalities?"

"Yep, which is why I'm trying to buy it. Uncurse it if I can, and if I can't, then I'll get rid of it. Safely."

I'm putting my phone down when it dings again.

"Seriously?" I mutter. "Sorry about this."

"Cancelling a weekend at the last minute is a cause for apology," he says. "Trying to remove a cursed object from the world is not."

I shift on the chair, hoping I don't look too uncomfortable. I want to be angry with him. Annoyed, at least. He's not making that easy.

I open the bidding app and let out a profanity that has his brows shooting up. He sets down his sandwich as I show him the screen.

"Some guy just *doubled* my bid."

It was already double what I wanted to pay. I don't say that. Even the current bid would be pocket change for Connolly.

I turn over my phone and set it down. "I'll figure that out later. The auction doesn't close for another couple of days."

"Tell me about the painting."

I shrug. "Definitely cursed. Definitely lethal. Not much to say beyond that."

"Really?" he murmurs. "There's no story?"

His gaze meets mine, green eyes glittering. He knows there's a story, and he knows I love to tell them. Still, I hesitate.

Was this week a temporary withdrawal? He wasn't sure that he wanted to continue the friendship, and now he is? He has the right to reconsider, especially given my curse. If that's what he's done—and he's now showing me that he's past that—then okay. Let's do this.

I sip my wine. I take a bite of my salad. And then I start the story.

## CHAPTER THREE

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BY THE TIME I finish the story, we're done with the meal and ready for the brownies. I slip into the back to make coffee. There's a machine up front—a one-cup brewer with inexpensive knockoff pods. That's fine for customers, and it's fine for me, yet I've invested in a pour-over system in the back, along with single-origin coffee, for the guy sitting out front. Not that he wouldn't drink the pods. I've seen him drink worse when his caffeine level runs low. But learning a new brewing technique and buying better beans is my way of showing that I "get" him.

Am I overdoing it? Trying too hard?

*Gah!* I'm overthinking this, and I don't like it. Don't like it at all.

As I take him his coffee, he has my brownie set out, with his own cut into tiny cubes, and I have to laugh at that. It's an in-joke—I'd once cut his up when he was in the balancing phase of a luck-roll. Connolly is a luck worker. He can manipulate luck, but when he does, he suffers a bout of bad in return for the good, when even a bite of brownie could send him into a choking fit.

Ellie sits on a dresser, watching him, narrow-eyed, as she always does. I could take that as a bad sign, but she doesn't dislike Connolly. She's just suspicious of this new person in my life. Maybe suspicious of the role he's filling and how fast he's filling it.

I pass over the coffee, and I'm about to sit when my phone buzzes.

"Oh, look," I mutter. "The bid has gone up again."

I flip over my phone and unlock it. The bid pops up. I read it and swear under my breath.

"Something wrong?" Connolly asks as he eats a tidbit of brownie.

"Someone paid the full asking price. Two grand."

"That's inconvenient." He washes the brownie down with a sip of coffee. "Is there any way of tracking the buyer? You could contact them and try to uncure it."

"How? *Oh, excuse me, that painting you bought really is cursed. But I can fix it. For free.*"

"I wouldn't say *free*. Ask for a few hundred and then negotiate. People are overly suspicious of *free*."

I shake my head. "While I highly doubt the buyer will let a stranger see their new painting, I can reach out. It's a username with an account. Damn. It's a brand-new account, created a few minutes ago. Username . . ." I glance up at him. "PotOfGold7. You bought it."

"Me?" His brows arch as he pops another brownie bit into his mouth. "That sounds like a leprechaun reference. It certainly wouldn't be me."

"Did you just pay two *thousand* dollars for a cursed painting, Aiden?"

"Certainly not," he says. "I invested two thousand dollars in a painting that can be uncursed and resold."

"Not for two grand."

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug. "One must make a few poor investments to properly appreciate the good ones."

"Somehow, I don't think that's your family motto."

He takes another bit of brownie. "No, our motto is *Oderint dum metuant*." He pops the bit into his mouth. "Let them hate, so long as they fear."

"Well, I *hate* to break it to you, but I *fear* you've wasted at least

fifteen-hundred bucks.”

“It’s not wasted if it removes a cursed painting from the world.” He lifts his coffee. “Do they offer charitable donation receipts for that?”

I sigh. Then I meet his eyes. “Thank you, Aiden, but—”

“You did not ask me to buy it, or even hint that you wanted me to. Allow me the occasional good deed, Kennedy, even if it doesn’t earn a tax write-off.” He checks his phone. “It says the seller is in New York state. May I suggest we pick it up in person? Perhaps tonight?”

I peer at him.

*What’s going on, Connolly? You just did a one-eighty, from canceling our plans and ignoring my calls to buying me a two-thousand-dollar painting and wanting to drive two hours to pick it up.*

“Is everything okay, Aiden?”

He meets my gaze again, locking it in. “Everything is fine with us.”

I hesitate. I can’t miss his wording. He’s saying that whatever is going on has nothing to do with me. Which suggests something *is* going on.

“And you?” I say carefully. “Is everything okay with you?”

His cheek twitches, even as his gaze stays steady. “Everything will be fine.”

I don’t miss the nuances in that answer, either, but it’s all he’s giving me, and I do not have the right to press for more.

“Sure,” I say. “I close at five, and I’m free after that.”

“Excellent. I will make the arrangements and pick you up at six. We’ll have dinner in the city.”

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I’M WAITING outside the house at six. Hope is with me, while Ani is in the house making dinner. When a car rolls up in front of the house, Hope bends and squints at the driver. The car stops, passenger window rolling down.

"Traded your wheels, huh?" Hope says. "Gotta say, I liked the other one better."

"As do I," Connolly says. "However, it's in the shop."

"This is the courtesy car? Last time I took ours in, we got a ten-year-old Kia that leaked when it rained." Hope pats my shoulder. "You kids have fun now."

"Have you heard from Rian lately?" Connolly asks.

Hope fixes on her blankest look. "Me?"

"If you do, please tell him I need to speak to him. It's urgent, and he isn't answering my texts."

I bite back the urge to snark that I know what that feels like.

"I'll tell him," Hope says. "But if you want him to answer, you have to stop marking them all as urgent."

"I mark them all urgent because they always are."

"Then maybe, just maybe, you could occasionally text him to say hello, and not only when there's a family emergency you think he's caused."

"I don't think—" Connolly cuts himself off. "Point taken. However, you might also remind Rian that when I *do* message to say hello, he accuses me of checking up on him."

She sighs. "Noted. I'll talk to him. Also, I'm going to start billing you two for sibling mediation services."

I slide into the car and wave goodbye to Hope. I wait until we've reached the edge of Unstable before saying, "Everything okay with Rian?"

He makes a noise in his throat. In the Connolly family, Aiden is the good son. The golden boy. Rian is the disappointment. The black sheep. All siblings are cast into stereotypical roles. In our family, Ani is "the smart one," and I often feel overshadowed by that. Hope is "the pretty one," and I feel overshadowed there, too. I'm "the fun one," and they feel that shadow cast by that, as weird as it seems to me.

But *our* roles were assigned by outsiders. To Mom and Dad, we were all smart, all pretty, all fun to be around. With Connolly and Rian, it was their parents who assigned their roles, and their parents

who keep them in them, and their parents who use those roles to pit them against each other. Connolly must look after his wild younger brother and rescue Rian from whatever scrapes he gets into, even if they're half a lifetime past being children, and even if Rian resents the interference, understandably so.

It's messed up. That's all I can say. Hope wasn't joking about sibling mediation. It's almost like being an interpreter between people who don't speak a common language. "When you say this, your brother hears that." "When you do this, your brother feels that." I'm just glad that they're both willing to listen.

I'm also willing to listen, yet Connolly only makes that noise in his throat that says yes, there's an issue, but he doesn't want to discuss it.

I'll deduce, then, that whatever's been wrong in the last few days does indeed have nothing to do with me. Another family emergency that Connolly got sucked into. He had to cancel our weekend, and he didn't mean to be so abrupt with it. He was just distracted.

I can grumble that if it's not about me, then I shouldn't be affected. But while Connolly can be the model of considerate behavior, you don't grow up in a family like his without developing a strong kernel of self-absorption.

"Hope's good for Rian," he says as we reach the highway.

"Um-hmm."

He glances over. "The question is whether Rian is good for Hope, with the answer being 'probably not.'"

"I've come to accept that if she gets hurt, she's old enough to deal with it. He's good for her, too, in his way. My concern is mostly that he'll be careless with her. He hasn't been so far."

"Agreed." He exhales the word, as if in relief.

"You aren't your brother's keeper, Aiden. If Hope *does* get hurt, I'm not going to blame you. I'm just going to kick Rian's ass."

His lips twitch. "I'll hold him down."

"Thank you."

His phone rings. With this not being his car, the caller doesn't show up on the dashboard. He doesn't check his watch, just taps the

Decline button. He knows who's calling, and I'd bet my life savings it's his mother.

"You need to set ringtones," I say. "So you know who's calling."

"I always know who's calling."

"There's also a handy call-block feature. Or one that sends certain callers straight to voicemail."

He only gives a humorless quirk of his lips.

His phone rings again. Again, he taps Decline.

"Aiden?" I say. "Not getting up in your business, but I'm guessing whatever's going on explains your sudden urge to fetch a cursed painting tonight."

A strained chuckle. "I had hoped my motivation wasn't quite so transparent, but yes." He hesitates. "Is that all right? I *do* think it's safer to get it ourselves. I wasn't trying to rope you into an unnecessary trip."

"You didn't."

He relaxes into his seat. "Then, yes, if you can temporarily block calls from my mother, I would appreciate that. I would have done it myself, but I told her I was working at home tonight, and she usually respects that."

I pick up his phone and then hesitate. Is his car really in the shop? His mother has been known to track him, going so far as to send security personnel to "check up" on him if he isn't where she expects him to be. She treats him like a teenager with a behavioral issue who's lost the right to privacy. He doesn't live under her roof. He doesn't work for her business. He doesn't give a damn about his inheritance, so she can't even hold that over him. Yet she holds something, and we haven't reached the stage where I can ask. I only know that it's not a matter of telling him to cut the apron strings. These aren't apron strings—they're cast-iron ankle monitors.

I won't ask about the car. Better he thinks I buy the excuse than force him to admit he had to rent a car to play hooky with me.

I open the phone. "Uh, it's not your mom. It's someone named Taylor Silver."

His brows knit. "That's the seller. Can you check for a message?"

I hold the phone out for him to unlock it with his face. Then I tap voicemail and hesitate.

"Ignore all the ones from my mother."

"And your father?"

"My father's calling, too? Now I'm really in trouble."

He rubs a hand over his face and murmurs an apology, as if that flicker of annoyance had been a raging tantrum. Sometimes I think a raging tantrum might do Connolly a world of good. Whatever lessons his parents have injected, they include keeping his cool at all times, and if that hardened into an icy wall that might be mistaken for arrogance and indifference? Well, it's better than the "weakness" of an emotional reaction, right?

I'm about to listen to the seller's voicemail when I notice another message.

"Oh, you also got a voicemail from a Theodora an hour ago. I'll let you listen to that, presuming it's business."

He stiffens, hands clenching the wheel before relaxing. "Yes, I'll take it later. Thank you."

*Not* business then. Theodora O'Toole. The surname screams Irish, and the given name screams money.

"Pretty name," I hear myself saying before I realize it.

He makes a strangled noise, and my heart thuds down into my feet. I take a deep breath, as quietly as I can.

If he's seeing someone, that's none of my business.

Easy to say. Logical and rational. And inside me, something wilts. No, it is pulverized, like a flower crushed under a heel.

It takes me a moment to remember why I'm holding his phone. Then I force myself and hit the Play button on the seller's message.

"Hello?" A woman's voice wavers with uncertainty. "Mr. Connolly? I tried to message you on the platform, but I haven't received a response. I wanted . . ." She pauses, and when she comes back, her voice is firmer. "I needed to notify you that the painting has been sold to another buyer. No charge was made to your account, and I apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused."

"What?" I say, my voice rising. "She can't do that. Can I call her back, or do you want to?"

He doesn't answer, and when I look over, his gaze is distant. I remember the other message. I remember Theodora. He's still thinking about that. Still trying to figure out how to tell me.

Stop it.

"Aiden? Did you want me to call back?"

"I'm considering our options."

I relax a little. He switches lanes and then says, "I propose we don't return the call. That we pretend I didn't receive the message. I am driving, after all."

"Show up on her doorstep expecting the painting? Making her face us when she says she sold it out from under you?"

"Precisely."