NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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SWAMP BROMELIAD
An InCryptid Story
Swamp Bromeliad

by

Seanan McGuire
"We got what we paid for. In the end, we didn't deserve any more than that. We didn't deserve any less, either. Let's hope someone remembers that, when we're all dead and gone." —Enid Healy

**Driving toward Buckley Township, Michigan**

Now

We had left the main highway behind us easily an hour ago, and were now wending our way through dense forest, traveling along roads that could have used some serious repair, and maybe a few closures. The potholes were big enough to qualify as small ponds, at least when they were full of water, and this far into Michigan's Upper Peninsula, they were *always* filled with water. Michigan might not be on Portland's level when it came to being damp, but it was making a good effort, and I wasn't ready to count it out yet.

Dominic was asleep in the passenger seat when we crossed the line into Buckley Township. I pulled the U-Haul off to the side of the road and stared into the imposing tree line that surrounded us on what felt like all sides. The sky was a thin sliver of blue overhead, already trending toward sunset. Chicago and the Carmichael Hotel were eight hours of hard driving behind us. If we didn't want to spend the night in the truck, I would need to push on, and soon.

I didn't move.

It was strange, being back in Buckley: it was like I was a compass, forever seeking magnetic north, and had just locked on to my target, no matter how much I wanted to go in a different direction. This was where my family's tenure in America had started. This was where, for better or for worse, the majority of our bodies were buried. My grandparents had met here. My great-grandparents had died here. It was impossible to understand the history of the Price family as it currently stood without also understanding Buckley--what had gone right there, what had gone wrong there, and what had gone unbearably weird there.

Dominic needed to see this. He needed to see what had made us before he got any deeper, because he was rapidly approaching the point of "too deep to get out," and I didn't want him to wind up there without all the facts. I wanted his choices to be based on all the facts.

And if I was being honest with myself, I wanted him to choose me anyway. I wanted him to look at the complicated, bizarre web of my family's history and say "yeah, that's about what I expected."

I took a deep breath and started the engine back up. Dominic didn't stir as I pulled back out onto the road, swerving to avoid a large pothole-slash-large pond, and continued on toward Buckley.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

No one knows anymore what made my great-great grandparents, Alexander and Enid Healy, decide to settle in Buckley Township, Michigan. They had just come from England, and it would have made more sense for them to settle on one of the coasts, in a place where foreigners were more common and hence more likely to be accepted by the locals. Or, if they'd been looking for a place where the Covenant was never going to find them, they could have kept on going until they hit the middle of the country and disappeared into the corn. Indiana, Iowa, all those big flat spaces on the map would have been better bets than Buckley, and yet for some reason, it was Buckley that had called them. They'd found themselves a house on the edge of the woods, an old farmstead that was in what could charitably have been called "need of repair," and was more realistically falling down around their ears. And they'd rebuilt it.
They'd raised a son there. When he'd come home with a woman, they'd done half the raising of their eventual daughter-in-law there. They'd buried a grandson and brought up a granddaughter there, and they'd done it all in the hand of the mountain and the shade of the tree. When my paternal grandmother talked about Buckley, it was always with longing mixed up so tightly with loss that I couldn't see the seams between them. When my father and my Aunt Jane talked about Buckley, it was with the deep relief of people who felt that they'd managed to avoid some terrible fate. As for the members of my generation, we were caught somewhere in the middle--and wasn't that always the case?

Buckley was in our blood. But not everything that gets into your blood is good for you. A lot of the things that get into your blood can be fatal.

The sun was losing its hold on the sky when I came rolling down Mill Road. I pulled the truck up in front of an old two-story farmhouse set way back from the street and surrounded by a white picket fence that wouldn't have done any good against anything that really wanted to get inside. I leaned over and shook Dominic's shoulder.

"Hey," I said. "Hey, wake up. I need you to see this."

"Hmm?" Dominic De Luca rolled his head toward me as he opened his eyes. He blinked for a moment, looking puzzled--how did he get here, what was going on, all those usual issues of time and place and memory--and then he sat up a little straighter, stopping only when his seatbelt pulled tight against his chest and pushed him back into his seat. "Where are we?"

"Buckley. That," I gestured toward the farmhouse with one hand, "is the old Healy place. That's where Alexander and Enid lived after they left the Covenant." That's where they lived until they died. I didn't really feel like I needed to say that last part. Dominic was a smart guy. He'd figure it out.

Slowly, he raked his hand back through his hair and focused on the house. "It seems pleasant," he said, after a moment to collect his thoughts.

"I know, right?" I smiled a little. "It's amazing what hard work can do. I've seen pictures of the place right after we bought it. We don't have too many photos from back then, but a lot of them are of the house. My great-great-grandparents rebuilt that thing basically from the ground up, and then, when they realized they didn't know jack about home repair, they hired some people to help them do it all again. Blood, sweat, and tears. That's what that house is made of. Mostly blood."

Blood in the walls, from accidents during construction, from painted runes intended to keep the darker things the world had to offer at bay. Blood on the floors, tracked in by hunters or escaping from between clenched fingers in the time between slash and stitches. Blood on the grounds, watering every inch of the soil. If the way to own a place was to bleed for it, my family would own that house and the land it sat on until the sun went cold.

Dominic reached for his seatbelt. I held up a hand to stop him.

"We're not going in," I said.

He blinked slowly. "I thought your family still owned the place."

"We do. We rent it out to people who actually want to live in Buckley, not just visit every decade or so. The folks who live there now have been living there for the past fifteen years. They're the ones who put up the fence." They had sent a letter asking for permission, which had been good of them. They hadn't asked for permission before they started cutting back the forest, thinning the tree line and
removing the underbrush. I had been home when they sent pictures for our approval. Grandma Alice had been there, too.

That had been the first time I'd ever seen her cry.

"They'd probably believe me if I showed up on the porch claiming to be one of the owners. I have ID, and I have my parents' number in my phone. But we'd be invading their privacy, and that isn't our house anymore. I mean, it's still our house. It's just not our home."

"But you wanted me to see it," said Dominic.

I nodded. "It's sort of important, you know? That's where all this started. The Healys in America."

To my surprise, he smiled. "It's absolutely important. I only wish that I could offer the same to you. The De Luca family roots are scattered across Italy, but I still know how to find them."

"They're in your blood," I said, and started the U-Haul. It was better if we moved along before our renters noticed that we were sitting on the street like a couple of weirdoes. The poor people were twitchy enough, thanks to living right on the border of a forest that they had never learned to love.

It was odd, in its way. Buckley Township wasn't a big place. It was one of two Buckleys in Michigan, and almost everyone who recognized the name was thinking of the other one, the thriving town with the healthy economy and the low unexplained death rate. Our Buckley was small and quiet and fading a little more with every year that passed, sliding an inch at a time toward irrelevancy, if it wasn't already there. The people who rented our old house weren't natives and didn't have any family in the township; they were holding on as much from stubbornness as anything else.

But maybe that was true of everyone who chose to keep on living here, in a place that time had passed by.

I drove down Mill to where it met with Woodside, and followed that until I came to Old Logger's Road, which was really just a glorified logging trail, already half returned to the wilds from which it had come. The pavement began to decay immediately after I made the turn, first becoming unstable, then becoming unreliable, and finally giving way to gravel and hard-packed dirt. The truck bounced and jittered all around us. I could practically hear my security deposit being scraped off by the rocky soil as it destroyed our shocks. I kept on going. There was still some light in the sky, and Dominic deserved to see the Parrish Place before he had to spend the night there.

Old Logger's Road was relatively uninhabited. There had been several houses there once, but most of them had been left to crumble back into the land. A few skeletons still stood sentry over their foundations. They wouldn't last for much longer. The world was working against them, and nothing can endure forever. That's just the nature of entropy.

We came around the final bend in the road just as the sun was entering its final descent. I stopped the truck at an angle. No one was going to come driving along here, and Dominic needed to see.

Maybe the Parrish Place would have been more attractive by sunlight than it was by the harsh, artificial glow of the headlights, which were unforgiving of its many flaws. Probably not. The Parrish Place hadn't been a pretty house when it was new, and now, after decades of repairs and tragedies, it looked like the sort of place that should have been dripping with ghosts, so haunted that it ached.

It wasn't haunted. No self-respecting ghost would have tied themselves to those walls, which were already possessed by the past. But it looked like it should have been.
From the outside, it appeared to be somewhere between three and four stories tall. No one had ever been able to get a reliable count of the windows, which seemed to shift and change every time they weren't being watched. The porch sat snugly against the front of the house, thanks to some efficient repairs and maintenance, but the porch swing was missing again, and its rusty support chains dangled freely. The whole thing was painted in a streaky, weathered combination of green and brown. It looked infected, like it was so sick that it might collapse inward at any time.

Dominic was quiet for a moment before he said, "The house does not appear to want us here."

"Nope, but it's not haunted. I have that on excellent authority."

That earned me a long-suffering sigh. "The collection of dead aunts, I assume."

"They both died in Buckley. They keep a very good eye on the local hauntings. Sometimes they drop by and lecture the newer dead about their technique." I opened my door. "Come on. I'll get the mice if you'll get my overnight bag."

"May I take this to mean that we are to be sleeping in the house that doesn't want us inside?"

I smiled a little. "I always knew you were a smart one. Now come on. I want to make sure the generator still works."

The generator still worked, and had been recently topped off with fuel: Alice had been through within the last few months. This was the closest thing she had to a home anymore, the fixed point that she circled when she wasn't running through dangerous dimensions, flipping over rocks and begging my missing grandfather to come home. Mom and Dad had both tried a hundred times to convince her to move to Portland. They could clear a guest room for her, they always said; they could make it her room, and she could be surrounded by her family when she needed to rest. But she'd always turned them down. This was the house where she'd lost her husband. This was the house where she was going to find him.

I returned from the shed to find Dominic standing at the dead center of the living room, looking around like he wasn't sure whether it was safe for him to touch anything. That wasn't a bad response to the Parrish Place, really. The couch was probably originally red, before decades of use and dust wore it down to a distressing dried blood color. The wallpaper was peeling in archeological layers, revealing the tastes of at least five full redecorations. The only thing in the place that looked like it had been dusted in the last year was the bookshelf, which was loaded down with charming titles like *Venomous Spirits of the American Ghostroads* and *What Just Bit Me? A Guide to Emergency Triage*.

(There was also a short stack of old Trixie Belden books on the bottom shelves, all of them well-worn and marked with multiple slips of paper. This was where Alice went to recover from the sort of things that required trauma kits and toxicology texts, after all, and she didn't have cable.)

"We're sleeping here?" demanded Dominic, before I could say anything.

"Sleeping, lying awake all night and wondering what that sound we just heard was, it's all the same." I walked to the bag that contained the mice and knelt to open it. They looked up at me, their tiny, furry faces grave. "We're home. Do you remember the rules?"

"Do not enter the bedroom where once the Noisy Priestess slept, before she became the Pilgrim Priestess; do not enter the library on the second floor, where once the God of Difficult Bargains and
Unwanted Knowledge left us," said the head priest. "Do not run across your face in the small hours of the night, no, not even if we are afraid of the sounds in the walls and hoping that our claws will wake you."

"Very good," I said, and stepped away from the bag. The mice poured out and were gone, scampering off into the corners and disappearing. I turned back to Dominic. "This is holy ground for them, especially since we started renting the Healy place to strangers. They have relics stored in the attic, and graves all around the foundation."

"And this is all fascinating, but why do we need to sleep here tonight?" Dominic was practically pleading. The Parrish Place had that effect on people. It was almost a relief to see that he wasn't immune. "It smells of mold and decomposition. I feel like the walls are watching me."

"They probably are," said a voice from behind him. I smiled. Dominic's response was a little more dramatic. He whirled around, hand going to the knife at his belt, eyes narrowing as he prepared to fight.

Then he saw who it was and relaxed again, half-panicked glare becoming a scowl. "Mary," he said, dropping his hand from the hilt. "You shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

"Technically, I didn't sneak," said Mary. "I just appeared while your back was turned. If you had any ectoplasmic sensitivity at all, you'd know when a ghost was showing up behind you."

"What did I say about tormenting the Covenant boyfriend?" I asked, putting an arm around Dominic's shoulders as I pouted at my dead aunt.

Mary rolled her eyes. "I swear, you people are no fun at all."

"You startled me," said Dominic. "I don't like being startled under the best of circumstances. Here, and now..." He gestured around himself with the arm that wasn't pinned between me and his body, indicating the walls all around us. "This is not a place well-suited to surprises."

"There were a bunch of murders here before Tommy bought the place, or before the Covenant bought it for him," said Mary, as easily as if she were disclosing a history of termite damage. "I guess they weren't too thrilled with him, since they stuck him as far out in the sticks as they could, in a house that had a history of swamp cultists and slaughter."

"Fun for the whole family," I said dryly.

Dominic, meanwhile, was looking around the walls with wide eyes, as if they had somehow become something different while Mary was speaking. "The Covenant bought this place?" he asked. "Why?"

"They wanted Tommy to spy on the Healys. Alexander and Enid were still alive back then, God rest their souls, and Fran was relatively recent in her grave." Mary shook her head. "The Covenant wanted to know if the Healys were still a threat, or so they said. Personally, I think they'd heard about Alice, and wanted to bring her back into the fold before she got too committed to the family path."

"That is...not out of the question," said Dominic, in the slow voice he sometimes employed when he was about to say something about his former employers that I wasn't going to want to hear. "The Covenant has put a great deal of time and effort into the breeding program. It's been the work of centuries for the ones who manage it. They had some of Enid and Alexander Healy's children, but retrieving their granddaughter would have been viewed as a bonus, by some."
"The more I learn about the Covenant of St. George, the more I wonder how my family managed to leave without setting a lot of things on fire," I said philosophically. "So basically, yeah. Grandpa Thomas was supposed to spy on the Healys, but he was sort of not in the good graces of his employers, for reasons I've never been a hundred percent clear on, and so they stuck him out here."

"In the murder house," added Mary. She sounded helpful. That was never a good sign.

My Aunt Mary would have been more accurately described as "my grandmother's former childhood babysitter with nowhere else to go, since her entire family died a long time ago, who now hangs around haunting us out of a lack of anything better to do." Even that wouldn't be completely accurate. There are a lot of types of ghost in the twilight, that hazy post-death layer where the dead go about their business. Mary was a crossroads ghost. No one knew exactly what that meant, because she refused to tell us, and Aunt Rose--usually our go-to source for ghost lore that Mary didn't want to disclose--refused to discuss the crossroads at all. "There are things the living can be spared, and that's one of them," had been her comment the last time I'd asked.

Mary had been dead for decades before I'd even been conceived, and there were no surviving pictures of her from when she'd been alive, so I couldn't tell if death had changed her. Maybe her hair had always been white-blonde, trending toward actual whiteness when she wasn't standing in deep shadow. But I was willing to bet that there had been a time before her eyes had looked like twenty miles of empty highway, all wasted miles and lonely turns. They probably had a color, and given her complexion and hair, they were probably blue or gray. I couldn't say for sure. I'd known her all my life, and all I knew about her eyes was that they looked like a drive I didn't want to take.

Dominic was scowling at her. "Why do you persist in calling it 'the murder house'?

"Because the man who lived here before Tommy was Abrahm Parrish, and he murdered his whole family to gain the favor of the god of the swamp," said Mary blithely. She flopped down on the scab-colored couch, stretching her arms languidly up above her head before draping them across the back of the cushions, like a teenager getting ready to tell some particularly gruesome ghost stories. Which, in a way, she was. "See, he started hearing voices. And then he started seeing visions. The usual assortment of beautiful naked ladies and unearthly flames, promising him wealth, power, eternal youth, all that good stuff, if he would just prove his faith to the swamps before they sealed the deal. So he sharpened his axe, and one night he chopped his wife and three children into mincemeat. The local authorities found the bodies, or what was left of them, anyway. And they found they axe."

"And this Mr. Parrish?" asked Dominic. He didn't sound like he actually wanted to know, which proved that he had more common sense than most people would credit him with. He glanced at me as he asked, like he was trying to figure out just how badly he didn't want to know.

But he was asking anyway. I had brought him here to learn the family history, and by god, he was going to learn it. I wanted to kiss him for that. With both Mary and the mice in the house, I didn't dare.

"Never found him," said Mary. She sounded like she was relishing the words. "Not most of him, anyway."

"I am going to regret this," said Dominic, in a calm, clear voice. "I know that I am going to regret this, even as I know that if I refuse to ask, you will find a way to introduce it into conversation later, probably while I am eating, or attempting to sleep, or otherwise even more primed to regrets than I am right now. What, ah, portion of the unfortunate Mr. Parrish was located?"

"His skin," said Mary blithely. "Just all hollowed out and gross and discarded on the edge of the
swamp like a big ol' balloon. Guess whatever drove him to do all that murdering didn't want him anymore after it was finished."

"Ah." Dominic shook his head. "We're spending the night here for precisely what reason, again?"

"Because we need to spend a night in Buckley," I said. "There's only one motel, and anyone who works there would recognize my last name and wonder why we're not sleeping here. We can't kick out the tenants of the other house we have locally. That leaves this one."

"Verity, I am aware that you have had an even more idiosyncratic upbringing than I did, and that for you, this sort of thing is perfectly normal, even mundane," said Dominic, with an air of exaggerated patience. "Please let me be the first to inform you that bringing one's boyfriend to the family murder house to be lectured by one of an assortment of dead aunts is distinctly abnormal."

I was opening my mouth to answer him when someone knocked on the door. Dominic stiffened. Mary sat up straight.

"Please, please tell me that one of you ordered a pizza before I got here," she said.

"Is this place even in the delivery range for the pizza parlor?"

Mary shrugged. "How am I supposed to know? Tommy used to get deliveries out here all the time."

"Yeah, because he lived here and he tipped really well and everybody wanted to be nice to the invalid Englishman so that maybe he'd leave them something in his will," I said, warily eyeing the door. "Most of the town figured he was loaded and Grandma was a gold-digger."

"Was he loaded?" asked Dominic.

"He figured out how to turn mud into gold, so yeah," I said.

The knock came again. It was just as startling the second time, and had the immediate effect of shutting down our digression and pulling our attention back to the door. Something had to be done. There was one obvious solution.

"I'm going to answer it," I said.

"If that's old man Parrish looking for his skin, tell him it's not here," said Mary. She sounded far too relaxed about the whole "someone is knocking on the door to the abandoned murder house" situation. Being dead already probably helped.

"Fuck you," I said genially, and moved toward the door.

I was almost there when the knock came a third time. I did a quick calculation on how many knives I had and how long it would take me to draw one or more of them. Then I swallowed my fear and opened the door, revealing the two boys standing on the porch. Neither of them looked to be more than twelve. Both of them were covered with mud, and soaked to the knee.

I blinked at them. They blinked at me. Finally, one of them worked up the courage to open his mouth.

"The light was on," he said.

"Um," I said. That didn't seem like enough, so I followed up with, "Yes, the light was on. Is on. Because we're in here. We're not trespassing. This is my family's house."
Their eyes widened in comic synchronization. "Your family?" asked the one who had spoken before. "You're a Parrish?"

"No, I'm a Price. The family that took the place over after Mr. Parrish went off to--we are getting off-topic here. Yes, the lights are on, because we're here. My boyfriend and I are on a road trip, and my folks asked us to swing through and check on the property." It was a little white lie, but it covered the basics, and it was close enough to the truth to be believable. "Can I help you boys?"

The one who hadn't said anything yet looked at me with wide, solemn eyes, said, "The bad flowers ate my brother all up and now I can never go home," and burst into tears.

"Oh," I said. "Well, crap."

It's not that I don't like kids: kids are swell, kids are great, I sort of think I might want to have kids of my own someday, when I settle down and stop spending quite so much time jumping off of rooftops. It's just that I have very little experience with kids, and most what I do have involved my little sister, Antimony, during her bratty pre-teen years. (Not that she became less of a brat when she got older. She just became a brat who I was no longer expected to babysit. It had honestly been a relief to us both.)

The two boys were now seated at the kitchen table with bottles of water--provided by Mary, who had disappeared when they weren't looking, presumably robbed a 7-11, and then reappeared with water "from the car"--and miserable expressions on their faces. At least the quieter one had stopped crying. If my experience with kids was limited, my experience with crying kids was functionally nonexistent.

"All right," I said, sitting down across from them. "Let's try taking this from the beginning. My name is Verity Price, and this is my family's house. What are your names?"

"I'm Joe," said the spokesboy. "This is Andy."

"Hi," said Andy miserably.

"Okay, now we're getting somewhere," I said. "My friends are Dominic and Mary, and they're going to help me find your brother, all right? What did you mean when you said that the 'bad flowers' ate him up?"

"You're not going to believe me," said Andy dully. The first rush of excitement over finding a house with its lights on this close to the wood had faded, leaving us with two pre-teen boys who were utterly convinced that we, as adults, would never listen to them.

I considered whistling for the mice, since talking mice were always good for proving the presence of an open mind. I considered asking Mary to turn transparent. And in the end, I settled for the path of least resistance. I smiled, leaned forward a little, and said, "I'm guessing you know the history of this house, right?"

They nodded.

"Then you should know that we'll believe a lot more than you think, because it's never a good idea to sleep in a murder house if you don't believe stories about things that could hurt you."

The two boys exchanged a look, engaging in the complicated silent conversation that has been the
purview of close friends since the dawn of mankind. Finally, they turned back to me. "If you laugh, we're leaving, and since you don't know who our parents are, you can't call them," said Joe.

"Works for me," I said. "Mary? Dominic? Any objections?"

"Hell, I'll open the door for them," said Mary. "I want to get back to the subject of pizza."

"See?" I offered the boys another smile. "No one here's going to laugh at you. So what happened?"

"We snuck out," said Andy. It was simple, matter-of-fact, and perfectly logical: the woods were dangerous, they probably weren't allowed to play there, and they were little boys. The woods were thus the coolest place in the world. "Me and Joe were going to go by ourselves, but Neil heard us, and he said--"

"He said he'd tell if we didn't take him with us," said Joe. He sounded incredibly affronted, like this was the greatest betrayal in the history of boyhood.

"No honor among thieves, kiddo," said Mary, stepping up next to me and resting her hand on my shoulder. "You mind if I cut in here? You don't seem to be getting very far with the Hardy Boys."

"Please," I said, leaning back in my chair. "You're the babysitter."

"That's right," said Mary, directing a feral grin--and those endless, empty road eyes--on the two boys, who went very still in their chairs. Apparently they had a sense of self-preservation after all. "Talk faster. No tattling, no finger-pointing, no blaming each other. Just talk."

"We snuck out and Neil snuck out with us only there were these weird flower things in the woods, and one of them grabbed his leg and then he went all limp like he was sleeping, even though his eyes were still open, and the plant pulled him all into its petals and closed up around him and now he's gone and we're going to be in so much trouble." The words spilled out of Andy in a rush, like he had just been waiting for an excuse.

"What did they smell like?" I asked.

Andy stared at me like I had just grown a second head. I smiled encouragingly. "Apples," he said finally. "Apples and strawberries and they ate my brother." He seemed concerned that I had missed that part. "That's why I can never go home. My parents would kill me. I'm not supposed to go into the woods. I'm sure not supposed to take my little brother with me."

"We'll figure out how to deal with your parents when we have to," said Mary. "Where in the woods were you?"

"Not far from here," said Joe. "We could see the lights from where we were. That's why we came here, and then when we saw that it was the old Price place, we thought that maybe it was the ghost, and she could help us."

"The old Price place?" said Mary, looking confused.

"But this house isn't haunted," I said, probably not looking much better.

For once, it was Dominic who found his footing first. "We're here, and we can help you," he said. "I don't think you should go back into the woods, but if you would like to wait on the porch while Mary keeps an eye on you, we'll go and find your brother."
"Alive?" asked Andy hopefully.

Dominic managed not to wince. It was a near thing, and I was proud of him just for making the effort. "That is outside our control, but we will try," he said. "Verity?"

"I'm with you," I said. "Let's just swing by the truck on our way out, okay?"

Dominic didn't ask me what we were stopping for. He was smart enough to know the answer.

"I am assuming you know these woods," he said, as we hiked through the uneven, weed-snared field toward the tree line. My backpack sloshed reassuringly with every step. Large quantities of lighter fluid will do that. If whatever had the kid was flammable, I was going to set it on fire.

"Nope," I said.

Dominic stopped walking to stare at me. "Excuse me, but did you just say 'nope'?"

"Yup," I said.

"But your family--"

"My grandmother grew up here, and my father was born here. He wasn't raised here. My Aunt Laura did most of the raising where he and my Aunt Jane were concerned, and she did it while she was traveling with the Campbell Family Carnival. We have the field guides, and we have my grandma, but I've never spent much time in these woods. Not without Grandma right there to warn me before I sit down on a bunch of igneous scorpions pretending to be a rock." I shrugged. "If you want to know what made that spooky sound in the woods back in Portland, I'm...well, still not your girl, because I don't do woods. But if it's an alley, I can totally help you out."

"Ah," he said, and resumed walking. "So we're going to die out here. That's understandable, I suppose. It was going to happen sooner or later."

"When given the choice, I always vote 'later,'" I said. "Anyway, it doesn't matter, because we know what we're looking for."

"Do tell," he said dryly.

"Plant, big enough to eat a kid, smells like weird fruit combinations? It's a swamp bromeliad. According to Grandpa Thomas's notes, we used to have a real problem with them around here. He cleared them out as much as he could, and Grandma Alice cleared out even more, but they couldn't have wiped them out, even if they'd wanted to. Conservation before extermination, remember?"

"It's adorable how you apply that principle to things that want to eat you alive," said Dominic.

"You don't sound like you think that's adorable."

"That's because I don't." Dominic shook his head, the motion barely visible through the gloom. "I thought bromeliads were a tropical species."

"Guess some of them didn't get the memo. Swamp bromeliads are carnivores. They mostly eat small mammals and slow birds, but they've been known to go for human prey." I stepped past the tree line
and pulled the ultraviolet flashlight out of my pocket, clicking it on and aiming it carefully at the
ground. "Don't step on anything that fluoresces. It's either going to be blood, teeth, or pee, and none
of those are things you want on your shoes."

"This is the most romantic stop yet on our road trip of excitement and delight," said Dominic.

I shrugged. "I just want you to know what you're getting into."

His laugh was soft, almost drowned out by the sound of our feet crunching through the dead leaves
on the forest floor. "Verity, honestly. Do you think I'm blind, foolish, or both? I knew what I was
getting into when you kissed me outside the bakery. That's why it took me a while to decide that I
was really going to go all-in. By this point, I doubt there's anything you could do that would surprise
me to such an extent as to change my mind."

"See, you say that, but then Grandma shows up for Christmas dinner with her patron snake god, or
Antimony blows up your luggage, or the mice decide to hold a ritual in honor of your penis, and bam,
you're out the door so fast that you don't bother to leave a forwarding address." I couldn't keep the
unhappiness out of my tone. I hated sounding so insecure. I hated it. I also knew how important it
was for me to be realistic. Relationships didn't usually last in our line of work. Dominic and I came
from different backgrounds, and the odds were against us.

"None of the things you have just described are surprising," he said. "A little disturbing perhaps, and
in one case, a little late to be a good warning, but not surprising."

I glanced at him. "Mice?"

"Mice," he confirmed, with a shake of his head. "I never needed to see a group of talking rodents
perform that particular dance routine. It will haunt me for the rest of my living days."

"Better yet, you'll probably see it annually."

Dominic grimaced. "Oh, hooray. But as you see, I am still here, despite the fact that your family's
resident cult has decided to treat me to multiple rhymes for 'scrotum.'"

"This is me, not asking," I said.

"Good," he said. "Returning to the topic of the bromeliads, if they're a native species, shouldn't you
be working to find a balance?"

"Ah, but see, they're not a native species. At least, not native to Michigan. We think they originated
somewhere in Polynesia and got brought over by some stupid 'explorer' who went 'gosh, wouldn't
these look pretty in my garden.' Maybe it's mean-spirited of me, but I hope they ate the jerk before
they went on to become endemic in low, swampy areas." I stepped over a fallen log. "They're not
exactly like their tropical cousins, which is why we don't consider them an exact match, but there's
nothing else like them in this country, and there are no records or myths referencing them before the
late 1800s, which usually means human intervention."

"Like the people who imported poison oak to England as an attractive groundcover," said Dominic.

"Exactly like them," I agreed. The smell of strawberries wafted from up ahead. I picked up my pace a
little. "So don't worry too much about uprooting a few--we want to keep the numbers down, when we
can. There's no way the two of us could wipe them out, even if we tried. They serve a purpose now,
anyway. They've been here so long that they've become essential for keeping the tailypo population
"There was probably a larger predator doing that once," said Dominic.

"Sure, but you know what humans do to large predators? We kill them. It's sort of our hobby. So you get things like coyotes controlling deer populations, and swamp bromeliads eating the tailypo and jackalopes that come too close." I shrugged. "Circle of life sucks sometimes. Anyway: they have sedative toxins on their thorns, so don't get grabbed or bitten. The smell can be really disorienting."

"Because it doesn't belong in a swamp?"

"Because it contains compounds similar to those found in cannabis, and if you're one of those people who get high off swamp bromeliad pollen, you can get really high. That's a big part of their hunting strategy. Get you so stoned that you don't care about the tendrils that are wrapping around your legs, and then swallow you when their sap puts you to sleep."

Dominic eyed me. "Charming."

"I didn't invent them. Nature did that. Save your side-eye for nature."

"Oh, believe me, should I ever meet the anthropomorphic personification of the natural world, she and I will be having words." He sobered. "Are we retrieving a child or a corpse?"

"Honestly, I don't know." I looked at him, our faces pale and eerie in the glow from my flashlight. "Swamp bromeliads eat slow and digest slower. There's a good chance he's still alive. There's also a good chance he's overdosed on bromeliad sap and stopped breathing. Anything that knocks you out can interfere with autonomic functions. We'll know when we find him."

"And if he's gone?"

"Then again...I don't know." My family had a mixed reputation in Buckley. The people old enough to actually remember the days when my grandparents patrolled the woods and kept local deaths to a minimum never talked about our service to the township, but they knew that we'd been on their side. For everyone younger, we were ghost stories and campfire tales, as much part of the terrible oral history of the region as Abraham Parrish and his axe. And just like him, we were frequently cast as the monsters of the piece.

(Now, to be fair, Abraham Parrish was the monster of the piece. He took an axe and chopped up his entire family. That's not the sort of thing that was easily excused as "people got the story wrong." Yes, there was a chance that some sort of evil spirit made him do it, but as he had wandered off into the swamp without his skin, we were never going to get his side of the story. Whereas my family was usually happy to give our side of the story, generally while holding our hands in the air and shouting "Wait, wait, don't shoot!"

The smell of apples and strawberries got stronger. I motioned for Dominic to slow down. Swamp bromeliads don't have ears and couldn't hear us coming, but they did have roots that ran surprisingly deep in marshy soil, and were capable of picking up vibrations. Since they were ambush predators, they were likely to spread their petals and try to entice us, rather than closing up and becoming harder to see. That didn't mean we needed to put them on alert before we were close enough to start pruning.

We stepped into a clearing. The smell of apples and strawberries was cloying, thick enough to be overwhelming. I stopped dead, my mouth dropping open as I played my flashlight across the area.
"Oh," I said, weakly. Dominic didn't say anything. There wasn't much of anything to say. The bright-petaled flowers covering every available surface said more than enough on their own.

There must have been forty bromeliads covering the ground and dripping from the trees, their roots making the bark look like it was being covered with thin white worms. About half of them were in the blooming state, their petals spread wide and pumping perfume and pollen into the air. The other half were closed, occupied with digesting their prey. None of them were bulging enough to contain our missing boy. He had to be further in.

I sneezed.

"Okay, wow, I have never been so glad not to be one of the people who gets high off these damn things," I muttered. "Watch your step from here out. If you weren't worried about losing toes before, this is where it gets tricky."

"I like crumpets, but no one should ever have to chase a bogeyman around Euro Disney," said Dominic in a reflective tone.

My heart sank. "Fuck." I turned to face him. I couldn't tell if his cheeks were red--ultraviolet light doesn't show that sort of thing clearly--but I could see that his pupils were blown out until he looked like he'd just come from the optometrist. What's more, he looked...relaxed. Utterly at peace, in that way that only the profoundly drunk can ever seem to manage.

"You're beautiful," he said. "Did you know? You must know. You own so many lip glosses. No one would own that many lip glosses and not know. Do you want to dance?"

"You're stoned," I said. I couldn't send him back through the woods by himself; he'd never make it out alive. Even Grandma Alice had only navigated the woods drunk once, and she'd been incredibly lucky. At the same time, we couldn't turn back now, or Neil would be a lost cause. He might still be alive. We might still be able to save him. But we had to keep going.

"Dance with me," said Dominic. He grabbed for my hands, beaming beatifically. "You're so beautiful when you dance."

"Yeah, yeah, poetry in motion," I said, stepping back a little.

His smile became a puzzled look as he grabbed for me again. "No, not poetry. Not poetry at all. You're like a murder ballad in high heeled shoes. It's amazing. Dance with me, please. It's such a lovely night."

I blinked at him. And then, finally, I smiled. Maybe he was onto something. "All right," I said. "Let's dance."

Dominic was a good Covenant boy from a good Covenant family. He might not have been a professional, but he knew how to waltz and he knew how to tango, and when I stepped close and formed a proper frame with my arms, he knew where to put his hands. Keeping my eyes on the ground and my flashlight clamped in our raised hands, I began to dance with him across the clearing.

Our first task was not stepping on any bromeliads. That was easier said than done: the larger blooms could be up to three feet across, but the small ones were no bigger than healthy mushrooms, and crushing them would just release more pollen into the air. I didn't need Dominic to get any higher than he already was. If I'd had a glass of cold water and some Benadryl to feed him, I would have.
"I like this forest," said Dominic, as we slowly progressed toward the far side of the clearing. "The flowers are pretty."

"Pretty big, pretty dangerous, pretty much a pain in my ass," I said, in an agreeable tone. There was no point in arguing with him right now. Kicking a man while he was stoned off his ass on psychotropic pollen just wasn't fair.

"You're pretty, too."

"So you keep saying." I kicked my foot up to avoid a mid-sized bromeliad. Just a few more steps and we'd be there.

"I think I'm going to stay with you always."

I stumbled, nearly stepping on a bromeliad. Recovering my balance, I said, "Well, here's hoping. Dominic, look. If we find the missing kid, I want you to stay back and let me cut him free. You can stand guard, okay?" And not use knives near a sedated child. There were limits to how many risks I was willing to take with other people's safety.

To my great relief, Dominic nodded, once again smiling the dreamy smile of a man who was so high that he no longer cared about much of anything. "Of course. I like guarding you. It means you need me to do something."

"I need you to do a lot of things." We had reached the other side of the clearing. I leaned in to kiss him quickly before lowering my hands and stepping away. "Come on."

"Can't I stay with the pretty flowers?" The question was asked with such wistful sincerity that it made my blood run cold. I grabbed Dominic's hand.

"No, honey, sorry, but the pretty flowers will dissolve the flesh from your bones and use it to nurture their sprouts, and I don't want to date a skeleton. Come on, let's go be heroes and then we can go home and sober you up."

"Home to Italy?" He still sounded way too hopeful. Shit.

"Sorry again," I said. "Italy's a little too far from here and a little too close to the Covenant. We're going home to the murder house."

"Oh," he said sadly.

I tried not to dwell on what his definition of "going home" meant for our relationship as I turned and played my flashlight across the forest floor. According to the boys, it had been a single flower that took Neil. None of the tree-based bromeliads could have handled a meal that big without ripping its own roots out.

About six feet in front of me, I found it: a single large bromeliad, swollen until it looked like a massive Technicolor tick. It was pulsing softly, increasing the resemblance. I couldn't tell if the bulge was large enough to be an intact child. That didn't really matter.

"Stay here," I hissed, shoving the flashlight into Dominic's hand and pulling a knife from my belt.

Tendrils and tree roots caught at my feet as I made my way over to the bromeliad and carefully knelt down. With Dominic effectively out of the picture, I needed to be doubly careful to avoid the poisoned thorns on the plant's creepers. "We need to come back with gas masks and clear these damn
things out," I muttered, feeling for the edge of the big feeder petals.

"What? Should I come over there?" Dominic sounded disturbingly eager, like a big puppy asking permission to come play.

"No, stay where you are," I called. My fingers found the seam between the bromeliad petals. I followed it upward, until I found the place where they all came together. Then, still being as careful as I dared, I began to slice.

"I would come over there."

"I know. I really appreciate it. Almost as much as I appreciate you staying right where you are and holding the flashlight for me." The petals were slippery, and oddly tough, like cutting through fruit leather. I was painfully aware that a little boy's body--maybe alive, maybe already dead--was only inches from my knife, and that the wrong move on my part could make me, not the bromeliad, his killer. I kept slicing, trying to be as quick as I could without sacrificing my accuracy.

"I can do that."

"Thank you!" The bromeliad pulsed under my fingers, trying, in its slow, vegetable way, to pull away from my knife. If it had been faster, it might have been able to escape. As it was, I just adjusted my position, still careful of the creepers, and kept on cutting.

The first petal fell away, and a boy's hand flopped out of the flower, hanging limp. For one heart-stopping moment, I couldn't tell whether it was still attached to an arm. Then I followed it back to the shoulder, and started breathing again, even as I started slicing faster. I knew where Neil was now. I didn't have to be as worried about hitting an artery or slicing his throat.

The second petal fell away, and the bromeliad lost its structural integrity, dumping the body of its prey out onto the forest floor. Neil landed in a pile of limbs and viscous sap, unmoving. He had also landed squarely on the creepers, which might explain some of his motionlessness. That much bromeliad sap would put out a full-grown adult, and he was far smaller than that. Carefully, I wiped my knife clean on the leg of my jeans and slipped it back into my belt before I started feeling for a pulse.

There wasn't one.

"Shit," I hissed. Less careful of the creepers now, I wrestled him into a sitting position and smacked him twice, hard, between the shoulders. If he was dead, it wouldn't leave a bruise. If he was just having trouble remembering how to breathe, it might not help, but it wasn't going to hurt anything, either. Not at this stage.

"Verity?" Dominic sounded a little sharper now. Concern must have been cutting through the bromeliad haze. "What's wrong?"

"Kid doesn't have a pulse." I whacked him again. "We may have been too late."

Neil coughed.

I stiffened. "All right, spoke too soon. Neil, can you hear me?" There was no response from the boy, who was still limp and supporting most of his weight on my arms. But he was breathing: that was the important part. I leaned back and pulled my shirt off, using it to clear most of the sap from his face before I locked my arms around his torso and hoisted him over my shoulder in a fireman's carry. My
shirt, which was now ruined, wound up abandoned on the ground. That was fine. I could get it in the morning, when we came back out to start cleaning up the bromeliads.

I half-walked, half-staggered across the field of bromeliads to where Dominic was waiting for me. "Trade you for the flashlight," I said, leaning in his direction so that he would take the kid away from me. Maybe asking a stoned man to carry an injured child through a dangerous forest was irresponsible, but doing it myself didn't seem much better, not when I couldn't trust Dominic to shoot straight to save his own life. At least if he dropped the kid, the mud would break the fall.

"This is a very heavy trade," said Dominic dubiously, as he took Neil away from me.

"Yup," I agreed, taking the flashlight. "Now come on. This kid has a panicked older brother waiting for him back at the murder house."

Dominic nodded, and followed me obediently back the way we had come.

As we came to the edge of the wood, it was easy to see why the boys had seized on the Parrish place as the answer to all their prayers: the porch light was like a beacon in the darkness of the field beyond the forest, calling to weary travelers who might have gotten lost within its sphere. I felt like a moth following a flame as I walked toward it, moving slowly, so as not to lose track of Dominic. The bromeliad pollen was still working on him, although his head seemed to be clearing the further away we got: he wasn't staggering as much anymore, and his pupils were returning to their normal size. Thankfully. I wasn't sure I could cope with a sick kid and a thoroughly stoned boyfriend at the same time.

"It's very quiet here," he said, when we were halfway across the field.

"Yes," I agreed.

"It must have been very hard for the Healys to adjust."

I blinked, giving him a sidelong look. "What do you mean?"

"Just that it's always loud, in the halls of the Covenant. So many people, saying so many things." He looked suddenly tired. "It can be exhausting, learning not to listen to the things that don't apply to you."

"Maybe it was a nice change," I said. "It's quieter with me, isn't it?"

"Yes, except for the mice," said Dominic. "Did I tell you they wrote me a song?"

"Yes and please don't sing it," I said, before he could start. It was one thing to know that the mice had composed a song in honor of his genitals. It was something altogether different to hear him start singing it.

"Aw," said Dominic. He sounded genuinely disappointed. I swallowed the urge to laugh at him.

"Maybe later," I said, stepping up onto the first porch step and turning to help stabilize Neil, who was still dangling limply over Dominic's shoulder. "Careful now. We don't want to drop him."

"No," agreed Dominic. Together, moving slow, we were able to get Neil up the steps without any
incidents. It was a relief to turn and open the front door. The woods were behind us. Things could only improve from here...assuming the kid lived.

That was the real problem here. I didn't know exactly how much bromeliad sap he'd been exposed to, but it was enough that he still wasn't moving. I led Dominic to the couch, where we carefully lowered Neil to the cushions. Dominic swayed slightly as he straightened, looking around the living room with almost drunken appreciation.

"I like how the wallpaper moves," he said.

"Yeah, a lot of things in this house can move," I said. "I don't want to follow Grandma Alice's lead and chase you through a rip in the fabric of reality, so stay right where you are, okay? Don't go looking for things that move."

"All right," said Dominic obligingly.

That was probably about as good as I was going to get. I checked to make sure that Neil was still breathing. Then I straightened and headed for the kitchen.

Mary had the boys sitting at the kitchen table, sipping their water and casting doleful looks at the back window. Both of them jumped when I appeared in the doorway. Mary didn't. She had been dead for too long to be skittish.

"I found your brother," I said, skipping the preamble in favor of getting straight to the important part. "He's in a bad way. Does he have any allergies?"

"No," said Andy, half-rising from his seat. "Where is he? Is he hurt? Can I see him?"

"He's not hurt, but he's been sedated by the flower that was trying to eat him. It's basically an allergic reaction. I need Benadryl. Mary, can you get some from the car?"

"On it," she said, and walked briskly past me to the hallway. Her footsteps stopped abruptly after that, and I knew that she was gone, off to get allergy medication from the nearest convenience store. I hoped she was paying for the stuff. Under the circumstances, I wasn't going to get too worked up about it.

I turned my attention to the boys, who both looked terrified. Good. "I'm going to do what I can for your brother. You can come into the living room if you want to, but I need you to stay out of the way, you understand?"

"Please don't let him die," said Andy, in a very small voice.

"I'm trying," I said. I turned my back on them and walked back into the living room. They would follow or not depending on what they needed. In the meantime, I needed to fix a little boy.

Mary was already back from her Benadryl run, crouched down next to Neil and holding a small plastic cup to his lips. I couldn't tell if he was swallowing. Dominic was sitting on the floor next to the couch, his head in his hands. The bromeliad pollen must have been wearing off, and leaving him with one clanger of a headache.

"How's the kid?" I asked.

"His breathing's steady, and his heartbeat is strong," said Mary. She looked up, meeting my eyes with her empty highway stare. "He's going to live."
If anyone would know, it was her. I let out a slow breath. "That's good."

"He might not, next time." She returned her attention to Neil. "He'll be sensitive after a dose this big. If he gets hit again, he could go into anaphylactic shock and die."

"We won't take him back into the woods, we swear," said Joe. I turned. The boys were standing in the doorway, staring at Neil. "We didn't want to take him this time."

"You shouldn't have been out there," I said. "Where do you live? I'll drive you home."

"Mill Road," said Andy. "Joe's sleeping over."

My heart sank. Of course. "I think I know the house," I said.

Walking the boys up the steps of my family home was difficult, and not just because Neil was still asleep. His breathing had evened out. By morning, he'd be right as rain. No, the difficulty came when their mother opened the door and looked at me like I was a monster. I could see it in her eyes. She knew who I was. She also knew that I didn't live in Buckley, that I was a visitor at best and a tourist at worst. To have me in town the night her youngest son was hurt…

It wasn't going to matter that I had saved him. All people would remember was that I had brought him home.

I drove back to the Parrish house in silence, my hands clenched tight on the wheel and my eyes fixed on the road. Even seeing the porch light welcoming me home didn't help my mood.

Dominic and Mary were in the kitchen, him slowly sipping from a mug of black coffee, her leaning up against the counter. She smiled when she saw me.

"It's been fun, but I need to go," she said. "Ghost things. You going to be okay without me?"

"I have been so far," I said.

Mary snorted. "That's what you think," she said, and disappeared, leaving me alone with Dominic.

I walked over and sat down across from him. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a fool." He grimaced. "I didn't anticipate being so affected by those flowers."

"You never know who will be until it's too late. At least the stuff wears off quickly."

"True," He took another sip of coffee, looking at me thoughtfully. "So this is where your family comes from."

"Yup." I shrugged. "This is as bad as it gets."

"Then I see nothing wrong." His smile was pained but sincere. "You said you wanted me to know what I was getting into. I officially know."

"Cool."
"Would you like to marry me?"

I went very still.

"I realize we've not been involved for as long as some. But I should think that giving up my entire past for you shows sincerity. And you--you've shown your past to me. It's beautiful. I want to be a part of the future that goes with all this madness and fuss." Dominic pushed his coffee aside. "So will you?"

"You're still messed up on bromeliad pollen," I said dully.

"No, I'm not," he said. "Call your aunt back, if you don't believe me. She knew I was well some time ago. I am asking out of sincere desire, and my head is clear."

"I..."

"If you don't want to, I'll understand." He looked sad, but he didn't sound angry.

That decided it. "Who said I didn't want to?"

Dominic blinked. "Come again?"

"I would love to marry you, on one condition."

"What's that?"

"My bouquet will not be made of bromeliads."

He laughed, and everything was fine.