THE FIRST FALL

An InCryptid Story
The First Fall

by

Seanan McGuire
Buckley Township, Michigan, 1935

The sky outside was full dark and spattered with stars when Enid Healy decided that sleep was over for the night; it had gone, leaving her wide-awake and aching in her bed, and the best thing she could do was get up before she woke her husband. Alexander was going to have a hard enough day ahead of him—they all of them were—without starting the morning worn out by her restlessness. Moving as quietly as she could, she slipped out of the warm bedclothes, shrugged on her robe, and made her way out of the room to the stairs.

She paused there with her hand on the bannister, looking over her shoulder at the closed door of the bedroom shared by her son and daughter-in-law. Jonathan probably wasn’t sleeping much either, given the circumstances. Fran would be, but only because her tea had been dosed with a little something to ease her way into a deep and dreamless slumber. Out of all of them, Fran needed the rest most of all.

Enid sighed. In any kind world, they wouldn’t be going through this. In any kind world, their sleepless nights would have an altogether different cause—a much happier one. She had long since given up hoping that she would ever live in any sort of kind world.

Still moving as quietly as she could, Enid descended the stairs.

There was something to be said for spending decades in the same house. She didn’t need a light as she navigated the hallway to the kitchen—every piece of furniture and knick-knack was so familiar as to be almost an extension of her own arm. When she reached the kitchen doorway she flicked on the light, filling the room with a soft yellow glow. The mouse that had been sitting patiently on the counter straightened, resting its weight on its haunches as it nervously adjusted its tiny denim cape. Fran’s work, no doubt; the stitches were too fine and regular to be Enid’s. She had never much cared for sewing.

“Good morning to you,” she said politely, as she started toward the sink. She paused only long enough to retrieve the big black kettle from the stove. They were going to need a lot of coffee, strong and hot, before they left for the churchyard. “Have you been waiting long?”

“No, Priestess,” replied the mouse, in a subdued squeak. “We have been Taking Turns since the God of Unexpected Situations carried the Violent Priestess away to the bedchamber, where we have been bid not to go, lest we trouble her further. Is she…is she well, Priestess? She does not speak to us. She does not come to evening services, or mend that which has been worn and broken.”

“Frannie’s having a hard time of it right now, just like all the rest of us, but more so,” said Enid. She placed the kettle under the tap and turned the water on. “You mind Johnny where she’s concerned, you hear me? He knows what’s best for his own wife.” And maybe if she said those words often enough, she’d start to actually believe them. Johnny was as lost as Fran. They were two stranded souls in the same desert, and until they started pulling each other across the wasteland, they were never going to make it safely home.

“She mourns the God of Early Arrivals and Earlier Departures,” said the mouse. There was a quiet heartbreak in its words, especially as it spoke the second half of the title, which was so horribly, achingly new. It hadn’t been needed three days before, and now it was going to be remembered by the mice for as long as the colony endured.

Tears sprang to Enid’s eyes, hot and bitter as seawater. We’re all just one heartbeat from the ocean anyway, she thought, as she blinked them away. Of course the mouse was upset; the whole colony would be in mourning. They always were when a member of the family…
Enid took a shaky breath, and said, “Yes, she does. We all do, but Frannie mourns him most of all, because she was his mother, and mothers mourn for their sons. You understand that, don’t you?”

The mouse nodded. “I do, Priestess. That is why we have been waiting here for you throughout the night, rather than troubling the Violent Priestess with our request.”

“And what request would that be?” Enid asked, fighting to keep her tone level.

“The God of Early Arrivals and Earlier Departures was beloved to us. He will be forever part of the pantheon that watches over the colony from the place beyond the attic, where the cheese and cake are bountiful, and where we will all one day go.” The mouse spoke with absolute and utter conviction. There was a Heaven; Daniel was there; one day all the mice would go to join him.

“I know,” said Enid.

“We wish to send a member of the colony with you today, to bear witness to the burial. It…” Here the mouse faltered, seeming to search for the appropriate words. It looked almost lost, sitting alone on the counter, dwarfed by everything around it. Finally, it said, “It would break our hearts to know that in the end, a part of who he was in this world was left outside the scripture. It is our duty to remember those who go. We cannot do that if we do not bear witness.”

Enid hesitated. “You want to send an envoy to the funeral, is that it?”

“Yes, Priestess.”

“And you didn’t want to ask Fran, because you knew that she’d be upset.”

“We were afraid she would refuse us,” admitted the mouse. “We would not come if she told us no, but we are so afraid of leaving the God of Early Arrivals And Earlier Departures alone in the dark, with no ending to his story and no one to ever tell your children how he was safely laid to rest.”

“You can come.” Jonathan’s voice was still thick with sleep, as unexpected in the quiet kitchen as the sound of gunfire. Less expected, maybe—this was the Healy household, after all.

Enid turned, feeling obscurely guilty, even though all she had done was get out of bed and have a conversation with a mouse. Both were perfectly normal things to do, even under unusual circumstances like these. “Johnny. I didn’t hear you get up.”

“You didn’t think I’d be up for hours, you mean, with the sedatives that you slipped into my evening tea. Don’t bother trying to lie to me about it, Mother—your guilt is written plain as day across your face. How much did you put into Fran’s coffee?”

“Enough,” Enid admitted. “She needed to get some sleep before…” She faltered. Saying “funeral” seemed so damn final, and not saying it felt like a lie. “Well, before.”

“We all did,” said Jonathan. He focused his attention back on the mouse. “You are welcome at the funeral of my son. I am sure his mother would say the same, if she were in any condition to speak with you.”

“Thank you,” said the mouse.

“But you must follow all the rules, and one new rule. If you don’t feel you can do that, you can’t come.”
“Anything,” said the mouse.

Jonathan took a deep breath, momentarily closing his eyes before opening them and saying, “Leave Fran alone. She’ll talk to you when she’s ready to talk, but for now, treat her like you would a stranger, and stay out of her sight.”

“It Shall Be So,” said the mouse.

Enid, once again blinking back tears, put her arm around Jonathan’s shoulders. “All right, that’s enough business for one night,” she said. “Let’s get some food into you before you wake up all the way and decide that you can’t eat.”

“All right, Mother,” said Jonathan meekly, and yielded what little strength he had left to the familiar pattern of following her lead. This was her kitchen, after all; this was where she had worked magic in his childhood, kissing scrapes to make them better and somehow knowing every time he got into trouble. This was where his mother could do anything.

Anything but what he most needed and wanted her to do. The two of them sat at the kitchen table with their cups of coffee and their plates of scrambled egg and toast, and the night was dark and silent around them, and nothing got any better. Nothing got any better for anyone.

The Healys were generally known as “Easter Sunday Presbyterians” in the town. None of the local priests or ministers put any pressure on the family, no matter how some members of their congregation might mutter and complain. All of them knew what kind of service the Healys did for Buckley, and if they wanted to do that service privately, without the shelter of a home church, well, that was their business. Still, when it came to burying one of their own, the Healys had proven to be surprisingly traditional. Only hallowed ground would do, and the funeral services had to be performed by a priest, with all the trappings that entailed.

Father Wallace had agreed to perform the ceremony with much less protest than most of his parishioners had expected; the Healy boy had been unbaptized, after all, and the good Father could be very strict about points of clerical law. He couldn’t see his way to burying the child in the churchyard, but the graveyard behind the old Presbyterian church had been properly blessed in its day, and it had never been unhallowed. It would do, according to Alexander Healy, who had made all of the arrangements.

“I’d never seen him looking old before,” Father Wallace had admitted to his secretary, as he finished preparing for the ceremony. “Tired, yes, and injured, and even haunted by demonic forces the like of which no good, god-fearing man should know, but he never seemed old. I always thought that he’d outlive us all.” Watching the man prepare to bury his first and thus far only grandchild, however, Father Wallace had ceased to be so sure.

The morning of the funeral was the type of day that everyone wanted, in their heart of hearts, when they had to bury a loved one. It was gray and bleak, with a sky the color of a half-erased slate, all chalky lines and emptiness. A faint drizzle had been falling off and on since dawn. Of the four surviving Healys, only Enid had an umbrella. She stood beneath it in her black cotton dress, her eyes bright with tears that she was not allowing herself to shed, her eyes fixed on the small shape of Daniel’s coffin.
After the burial, Father Wallace would have sworn that he’d seen something moving in her hair, something small and quick and sheltered from the rain by that same umbrella. But that was foolishness. Enid Healy might be a foreigner—would always be a foreigner, no matter how long she lived in Buckley—but even foreign ways wouldn’t extend to bringing pets to a funeral. Before the night was over, he would put the thought from his mind, and he would never return to it. Sometimes, in Buckley, life was easier that way.

The other three stood exposed to the rain, not seeming to notice as it drifted down to coat their hair and clothes in a thin layer of tiny, clinging drops. Jonathan and Frances stood together, his arm around her shoulders like he was trying to hold her up, even though the emptiness in her eyes was reflected in his own. Alexander stood a few feet away, and his eyes were fixed on the yawning hole in the churchyard, dug to the dimensions of that heartbreakingly small coffin.

“…in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, we convey our dearest beloved Daniel into the arms of the Lord, where he will be home, and safe, until such time as we are blessed to see his face again,” said Father Wallace. “In Jesus’ name, amen.”

“Amen,” echoed three of the Healys…but not Fran. No. Fran had raised her head, seeming to come slightly out of her stupor as she stared at the priest.

Jonathan sensed the danger and tightened his arm around her shoulders. It was too late; the damage had already been done.

“He’s not home,” she spat, voice low and dangerous. “I don’t know where my son is, but wherever he is, he’s not home, you pious old bastard. Home was here, with us, with me, not with some God who couldn’t even stop a little boy from—from—” She choked on the rest of the sentence and whirled, burying her face against Jonathan’s shoulder as she began to sob.

Father Wallace looked lost. “I am sorry for your pain, my child,” he said. They were only words. They were all that he had.

“I apologize, Father,” said Jonathan. “My wife is not well.”

There was no life in Jonathan’s voice; he might as well have been a recording, something without soul or true emotion. Father Wallace shook his head, trying to keep the pity from his face. She isn’t the only one, he thought. He had seen families bruised and families broken by the death of a child, and he was coming to be deeply afraid that the Healys would fall into the second category.

Alexander Healy stepped forward, throwing a small bundle of what looked like dried flowers and herbs into the open grave. “You’re a good boy, and we all enjoyed having you here with us,” he said, directing his words at the coffin. “Your momma misses you fit to die from it. But don’t come back, you hear me? Stay where you are, and rest, and let the world move on. We love you more than words can say. Sleep.”

A strange silence seemed to settle over the old graveyard. Even the sound of the birds in the nearby trees stopped, and for one long, nerve-jangling moment, it was like the world stood still.

Then Alexander raised his head, fixing his attention on Father Wallace—who would rather not have been its target, truth be told—and said, “You can close it up now. We’ve done what we need to do. He’ll rest.”

There had been little irregularities about this whole process. The closed coffin, when he’d seen for himself that the boy’s body was fully intact and suitable for an open casket ceremony. The flowers that
had shown up at the church, most of which were unfamiliar to him, not the usual roses and lilies. And now this.

Father Wallace hadn’t survived into his seventies while posted in Buckley by looking too deeply into certain mysteries. “May you and your family find peace,” he said solemnly.

Alexander looked back over his shoulder to the others, Fran still crying into Jonathan’s shoulder, Enid still standing silent and alone under her umbrella. “We’ll try, Father,” he said. “We’ll try.”

He turned and walked to his son, helping the boy lead Fran from the graveyard. Enid was the last member of the family to leave, remaining where she was until the others were well beyond the fence. Her lips were moving—in prayer, perhaps? Whatever she was saying, it was finished quickly, and she turned to follow the others, leaving Father Wallace alone in the rain, with only the open grave to keep him company. That, and the dead.

The old priest hurried out of the graveyard as soon as the family was out of sight, and Daniel Healy—whose life had been short, if happy, as such things are measured—was consigned completely to the past, which is a place that even the most experienced of travelers can never seem to reach.

The house was silent when the family got home from the funeral. There was no drumming from the attic or scratching from inside the wall; it was as if the world was holding its breath. Enid folded her umbrella and dropped it into the bucket they kept next to the door, drying her damp hands against her skirt before announcing, “I’ll be right down, and then I’ll see about working us up some lunch.” Her accent was thicker than usual, all Welsh vowels with the edges sanded off and consonants that had never seen American soil.

“I’ll get the kettle on,” said Alexander.

Enid mustered a faint smile. “That would be grand,” she said, and started up the stairs toward the second floor.

Alexander didn’t smile back. He simply didn’t have it in him. “As for you two,” he turned on Fran and Jonathan. “Go upstairs and change out of those wet things. You’re not doing yourselves any favors by freezing.”

Fran looked at him with blank, empty eyes. Jonathan caught her by the wrist, nodding to his father.

“We’ll see you at lunch,” he said, and pulled his unresisting wife with him as he followed his mother’s footsteps. She was already gone by the time he and Fran made it to the upstairs hallway. He moved a little faster, trying to pull Fran into their shared bedroom before she could see Enid emerging from the attic and realize that the mice had been in attendance at the funeral.

Fran knew that the mice were the living memory of the Healy family: that they never forgot anything, however small or inconsequential it might seem. Jonathan wasn’t sure she had ever really grasped what that meant, and right now, with the ghost of his lost son still hanging silently around them, was not the time to start explaining.

He needn’t have worried; Fran went docilely where he led her, with no flicker of protest or contrariness. It was enough to pierce the shroud of his own grief and make him wonder how long it had been since he’d seen any real signs of life from her. The answer was simple, even as it chilled him:
The last time she had looked like herself was the night that Daniel had died.

His hand still looped gently around her wrist, he led Fran to the bed. When he released her, she sat, still in her wet clothes, and stared down at the floor. She didn’t say a word. Other than her justified outburst at the old priest, she hadn’t said a word in days.

“You need to change into something dry before you catch a chill,” he said. “Would you like me to find you a sweater?”

Fran didn’t say anything.

“I thought it was a beautiful ceremony.” He would rather have had no ceremony at all, but that was not a sentiment he needed to share; not now, and perhaps not ever. Some doors should not be opened.

Fran didn’t say anything.

“Do you want a bath before lunch? I think Mother would understand if we were a little late getting downstairs.”

Fran didn’t say anything.

Jonathan stopped undoing the buttons on his shirt and moved to kneel in front of his wife, trying vainly to get her to look him in the eyes. “Darling, please. Say something. Say that you hate me, say that I ruined you by bringing you to this middle-of-nowhere hellhole and involving you with my family, knowing that we had enemies, say that you’re never going to trust me again, but please. Say something.”

Fran didn’t say anything.

“Oh, God, Fran.” Jonathan closed his eyes. “I can’t lose you both. I know it’s only been three days, but you’re not the only one who’s hurting, and I don’t know how to help you.”

“There’s two things you can do, Johnny Healy, and if you’re not willing to do the both of them without questioning me, you’d better be prepared to help me pack my bags, because I can’t stay here anymore.” Fran’s voice was barely above a broken whisper, but it was loud enough. Compared to her silence, it bordered on a scream.

“Anything,” said Jonathan.

Fran raised her head. Not all the way, but enough to let him see her hollow, hurting eyes. “I want to find the carnival. I want to talk to Junie. Ghosts...she’s always had trouble with ghosts. They won’t leave her be. I need to know if Danny’s resting quiet. I need to know if he’s looking for me.”

Jonathan swallowed hard before forcing himself to nod. “All right. We can leave tomorrow. I have some idea of their circuit, from when we brought them here for the wedding. We’ll find them.”

“That’s not all,” said Fran.

“I know. You said there was a second thing...?”

“Promise me.”

Jonathan frowned. “Promise you what, sweetheart? I already promised to take you to find the
carnival. What else can I do?"

“Promise me that this is the last child I bury. Promise me that you will not let this happen again, to any child of ours.” Fran’s eyes were filling with slow tears. “Promise me that Danny’s the only one we’re going to lose this way, because Johnny, this is like to kill me, and I don’t think I could survive it again.”

“Oh, Fran.” Jonathan enfolded her in his arms, pressing her face to his shoulder. “Shh. I promise. If we have any more children, I will do everything I possibly can to keep them safe. You have my word.”

“He was so little, Johnny, he was so little,” Fran whimpered, and clutched at his shirtfront, and cried.

They didn’t make it downstairs to lunch.

“Now you’re sure about this, son,” said Alexander, frowning as he watched Jonathan saddle Railroad, the aging bay he’d come home with after the trip that first brought Fran into their family. Fran was faster than he was when it came to tack; she’d be down to saddle her own Rabbit in a little while. “I’d be a lot more comfortable if you’d take the truck. Something more secure than a pair of horses. This is a motorist’s world these days.”

“Fran prefers horseback when it’s an option, and right now, if she’s willing to have an opinion, I’m more than willing to go along with it,” said Jonathan. “Ohio’s not that far.”

“Ohio’s not that close either, and if something happens to one of you…”

“She’s dying inside, Dad.” Jonathan kept working as he spoke, focusing on the patient horse in front of him rather than the heartsick father beside him. “This is killing her inside, and if I can make it even a little bit better by letting her ride her horse to Ohio, then I’m going to do it. I can’t… I can’t…” He stopped, resting his forehead against Railroad’s warm, faintly heaving side.

Alexander put his hand on Jonathan’s shoulder. “You can’t lose them both,” he said quietly. “I know, son. I know.”

“He was so little,” said Jonathan, without lifting his head. “Fran keeps saying that, and she’s right. He was still so little. He never had a chance to grow up. All the world he knew was inside our house.”

“That gives him a lot more world than many people will ever see,” said Alexander fiercely. “Now you listen to me, Johnny Healy, and you listen good. You were a good father to that boy. You are a good husband to Fran. You do whatever you need to do to make her feel like she can come all the way home to us, and we’ll be here when you get back. We’ll keep the home fires burning. But you have to take care of yourself, too, because as much as you’re afraid of losing your wife and son in a single autumn, I’m even more afraid of losing my son and daughter and grandson in that same amount of time. Do you understand what I’m trying to say to you?”

“I do.” Jonathan turned, looking at his father with the sort of unguarded hurt that he hadn’t really shown to anyone since he hit puberty, and puberty started hitting back. “Does it ever stop hurting this much?”

And Alexander—who knew more than he had ever cared to about how it felt to lose a child, either by settling them in the cold, hard ground or by watching them stay behind while you moved into a new
life—shook his head. “No,” he said. “I’m sorry, and I wish I had a better answer, but no. It never stops hurting this much. It just gets a little further behind you, and ghosts don’t always keep up with the living so well, even when those ghosts are only memories, and not actually the spirits of the restless dead.”

Jonathan sighed. “I was afraid that was what you were going to say,” he said, and turned back to getting his horse ready for the journey.

They rode for the first day in silence. Not the comfortable sort of silence that had grown between them in the years since they first met: this was a strained silence, heavy with the weight of the things that weren’t being said, and haunted by the blue-eyed ghost of a little boy who died so many years before his time. They made camp in a clearing a short distance from the road, falling into their respective patterns without conversation or thought. Jonathan built the fire, erected the tent, and drew the circle of salt and ball bearings around the place where they and their mounts would be effectively unguarded; Fran took her pistols and vanished into the wood, returning an hour later with two large buck jackalopes and blood on the knees of her jeans.

Dinner was a strained affair, half-burnt pseudo-rabbit meat stewed over the campfire with carrots and potatoes brought along from Enid’s kitchen. When they finished eating, Jonathan covered the pot and crawled into their bedroll, motioning for Fran to do the same. She came, but not willingly, and lay against him as stiff as a board. It wasn’t until he finally managed to drift off into restless slumber that she allowed herself to soften, and to cry.

The next morning, they woke uncomfortable and unrested, climbed back onto their horses, and began the whole process again.

The Campbell Family Carnival was a strange, outdated beast in this rapidly-changing modern world, still owned by a single self-made family—although so far as Fran knew, there were no actual blood members of the Campbell family left with the show—and still peddling its old-fashioned mix of sideshows, “wonders of the world,” and midway games to the willing public. They didn’t move fast, but they moved true, following the patterns of the crowd.

“I wonder if the elephants are still there,” said Fran, about noon on the third day.

Jonathan started in his saddle. It had been so long since he’d heard her speak unprompted that for a moment, he thought that he was daydreaming. But when he glanced her way her expression was thoughtful, not empty, and she was watching the horizon with that old familiar focus, like she expected the sky itself to start offering up its secrets at any minute. “Elephants are remarkably long-lived in captivity,” he said. “They seemed to be young and in excellent health when I saw them last, so I can’t think of any reason they wouldn’t still be with the show. Unless the carnival sold them again, of course.”

He realized the error of his words when Fran’s expression shifted, freezing over once more. By then, it was too late; he couldn’t have taken them back if he’d tried. “Daniel was young and in good health,” she said. Digging her heels into Rabbit’s flanks, she urged her horse forward at a trot, leaving Jonathan and Railroad behind.

“Damn,” he whispered, and rode after her.
They made it from Michigan into Ohio without incident. If the people passing them on the roads thought that it was strange to see two figures riding through the fields and along the roadside, they didn’t stop to say anything. It helped that much of what they passed through was farm country, where horses were still considered a more standard form of conveyance. It wasn’t the fastest way to travel, but sometimes speed was less important than the nature of the journey.

Jonathan saw the poster on the morning of the fourth day. It was a small thing, almost unnoticeable against the wide red expanse of the barn that it had been plastered against, but something about it caught his eye and then his full attention, until he tugged on Railroad’s reins to move him closer.

“Fran, stop,” he called. “Come have a look at this.”

At first, he didn’t think that she was going to listen to him; that this was going to be the moment where she struck off on her own, leaving him to ride back to his parents without her. Then she sighed—audible even from where he was sitting astride his horse—and turned Rabbit around, riding back to her husband’s side.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Look.” He pointed to the poster.

It was green, with hand-painted streaks of silver paint that seemed like an extravagance for something that was going to be posted in the middle of nowhere. “See! The Fabulous Campbell Family Circus,” it read. “One Night Only—Open to the Public—Be Dazzled and Amazed by the Wonders of the Natural World.” An arrow was painted at the very bottom, above a legend that read “Three Miles East, Impossible to Miss.”

“We found them,” breathed Fran. “Three miles East—Johnny, we found them!”

“Assuming this is for tonight,” he said, hating to quash her enthusiasm, but unwilling to let her hoist her hopes too high.

Fran waved his concern off with a flap of her hand, saying, “It’s fresh paint—you see that silver? It marks the poster’s age, that’s what makes it worth it. You put these ones out where you might find workers, or new recruits, and they can tell by how faded the piece is whether it’s worth their while. If we’ve missed them, it’s not by more than two, maybe three days, and we can catch up with that. They’ll leave a trail, oh, Johnny.” Her joy was a raw, aching need that filled her voice from top to bottom. “We’ve found them.”

This time, wisely, Jonathan Healy didn’t say anything.

Three miles east brought them to a low hill, which they urged the horses up without comment. When they reached the top they stopped, side by side, and looked down at their destination.

The Campbell Family Circus was either extremely good or extremely lucky when it came to site selection. They were settled on a wide, flat piece of land, with open fields on three sides and a well-paved road on the fourth. Rides and attractions covered the open ground, all built around the long, gaily-colored serpent of the midway. A thin line of trees stood between the carnival and the caravan that had carried it to the heart of Ohio.
“The boneyard,” whispered Fran, looking at that motley collection of trucks and trailers with open longing in her face.

Not for the first time, Jonathan wondered whether he’d be going home alone. “Shall we go down to see your family, darling?” he asked.

Fran didn’t answer. Fran just rode on.

Together, they made their way down the low rise and toward the back end of the carnival. It was open enough, with wide pedestrian walks letting out onto the open field. Jonathan couldn’t shake the feeling that they were intruders here, but that did nothing to slow Fran, who made for the nearest opening like a bullet shot from a marksman’s gun. Nothing seemed to dissuade her, not even the distant shout of a carnival worker catching sight of what had to look like a pair of strangers getting ready to ride their horses straight onto the midway.

“Fran—”

“Ain’t no nevermind,” she said, without turning to look at him. “We’re coming home here, Johnny, and coming home means coming as you are, not coming as someone else wants you to be.”

*I’m not coming home*, he thought desperately. *I’m following you into foreign territory, and I’m feeling a little more lost with every step you make me take.* But he couldn’t leave her here, not even if this little patch of mobile wonderland was her true home country. She was his wife and his life’s greatest love, and he owed her this, no matter how much it frightened him.

So they rode past the boundary of the carnival, past the sad little weight lifter’s stall and the outermost popcorn vendor, two lanky figures on horseback mingling with, if not blending into, the slow but growing crowd.

They were almost to the main stretch when a black-haired woman wearing too much eyeliner and a skirt that was more patch than original fabric stepped out from between two booths and directly into Fran’s path. She placed her hands on her hips, cocking her head to the side, and frowned at the woman on the spotted horse.

“If you wanted tickets, you could have asked,” she said.

“I didn’t want tickets,” said Fran, and her voice was small and lost and very nearly broken. “I wanted to come home.”

Juniper nodded. “Well, then, why don’t you get off that horse and give me a proper hug before we get you settled in the bone yard? Welcome home, Frannie. Welcome home.”

Fran was crying before her feet hit the ground. Jonathan slid off his own horse to catch Rabbit’s reins, and watched in silence as Juniper folded her arms around his wife, and drew her close, and held her.

Juniper led them through the maze of the bone yard, her arm around Fran’s shoulders, Jonathan walking behind with the two horses, until they reached a small, battered trailer that looked like it would blow away with the first stiff wind to come along.

“I knew I had to get this ready for visitors, although I wasn’t sure who,” said Juniper, letting go of Fran
in order to open the door. “It’ll sleep two if you’re cozy, and two even if you’re not, although it may be less comfortable that way. There’s no running water, but there’s a little range, so you can do some of your own cooking, and we have camp showers set up over by the bears. I’ll get your horses stabled with the rest of them. Rabbit still perform?”

“Hasn’t in years,” said Fran.

“Pity,” said Juniper. “That’d be a grand way for you to earn your keep while you’re here. We’ve never had a trick rider as good as you.”

“Never will, either,” said Fran, and for a moment, there was a ghost of sass and swagger in her voice, the phantom remains of a woman who had run off with a man who hunted monsters, just because it seemed more interesting than the life she had waiting for her with the carnival. Jonathan felt hope uncurling inside him, like a flower reaching toward the sun.

Maybe being with the carnival would be good for them after all.

“That’s probably true,” Juniper agreed. “The carnival’s open, but the main tent hasn’t closed down. If you need feeding or watering, head over there. You remember the rules of the establishment?”

“Don’t start fights, don’t be afraid to finish fights if someone else starts them, don’t take more than you think you can eat, everyone clears up after themselves except the jugglers, and they aren’t allowed to have more than a single place setting at a time,” Fran recited, without hesitation.

“And everyone gets their turn at the dishes, but we can talk about that later,” said Juniper, with an easy smile. “For tonight, you’re my guests, and every door we have is open to you.”

“Every door?” asked Fran.

Juniper paused, looking at the other woman sadly. “Yes, sweetheart,” she said. “Every door. Now you two get settled in; I’ll send someone around to show you to the main tent in a little bit. For right now, I have wrangling to do, and miles to go before I sleep.”

“Thank you, Junie,” said Fran.

“Don’t thank me.” Juniper shook her head. Her eyes were shadowed. “I don’t think thanking me is the right thing to do at all.” Then she turned, before Fran could recover enough from her surprise to ask what Juniper meant by that, and walked away, returning to the safety of the carnival’s midway lights.

The trailer lived up to its description, containing a bed that was large enough for two people, if those two people were very fond of one another’s company, a small dresser with three shallow drawers, and a “kitchen” that consisted of a camp range and a pantry half the size of the dresser. Jonathan estimated that they could keep a loaf of bread and a piece of cheese in there, at best, and that was assuming that the mice kicked up by the carnival didn’t find their way inside.

He didn’t say anything. Fran was too happy, and he didn’t want to risk chasing her back into the shell where she’d been living for these past few days. Instead, he stood next to the range and watched as she unpacked their things, stacking what wouldn’t fit in the dresser against the walls, and whistling to herself the whole time. There was color in her cheeks, and while he knew enough about grief to know
that it was stolen color, borrowed from herself through sheer force of will, it still did him good to see it.

"Should I know what this ‘main tent’ place is before we go there, or is it best if I can be horribly surprised?” he asked.

“Sometimes I forget that you’re a townie,” said Fran. There was an insincerity in her tone that made Jonathan’s eyes widen briefly. She had never forgotten that they came from different worlds; not once, not for a single day. She kept talking as if she hadn’t just lied to him, explaining, “The main tent is sort of a mess hall, sort of a social gathering space for folks who’re between jobs at any given minute. It’s dangerous to sit around there too long—someone will find something for you to be doing if it looks like you’re loafin’, instead of getting a well-deserved rest or a proper meal—but it’s a good way to keep your finger on what’s going on in the spaces where you don’t usually work. It’s a circus tradition more’n a carnival one.”

“But the Campbell Family Carnival started out as a circus,” said Jonathan.

Fran turned toward him as she nodded, and her smile was almost bright enough to make up for the shadows underneath it. “Got it in one, city boy,” she said. “They’ll feed us supper, maybe hand over some gossip that explains the lay of the land, and then they’ll turn us loose. We have tonight to be idle at the carnival. That’s not a small gift to get when you’re with a working show.”

“I shall take it for the treasure that it is,” said Jonathan gravely, forcing back the host of questions that threatened to overwhelm him. Chief among them was the one that he knew he was least free to ask: How long were they going to stay? Fran referred to being “with a working show” so carelessly, but that could mean anything, from hope to habit. It was better to keep his peace, for now, and let her be happy while she could.

Fran hesitated, biting her lip. “Johnny—” she began.

There was a knock at the trailer door. Both of them turned to look at it. Jonathan put a hand on the pistol belted to his hip. Fran motioned for him to stay where he was as she crossed to pull it open.

“Miss Healy?” The man outside was massive, easily six and half feet tall, with shoulders that seemed practically as wide. He was bald, his scalp pink and shiny in the sunlight. He was wearing overalls and a flannel shirt, which seemed like sensible choices, and his feet were bare. “Miss Juniper sent me to fetch you and Mr. Healy to the main tent, if you were ready to go.”

“Actually—” said Jonathan.

“We’re ready as rain,” said Fran, flashing a bright, performance-ready smile. “I was just saying to my Johnny how hungry I was, wasn’t I Johnny?”

Jonathan Healy sighed. “Yes, darling,” he said, and followed her to the door.

He had followed her this far, after all.

The bald man’s name was Max; he had been with the carnival for five years; he was one of the strongmen when he needed to be, but most of his time was spent caring for the elephants, which were troublesome and cantankerous and extremely beloved by everyone who traveled with the show. His grandmother lived on the permanent bone yard they’d established in New Mexico, helping to care for
the children who didn’t take well to traveling and training the next generation of carnival animals.
Johnny and Fran learned all this in the time it took Max to lead them across the bone yard to the low canvas slouch of the main tent. Jonathan would have been just as happy to make the walk in silence, but not Fran. She had a seemingly endless well of questions, and not until every one of them had been asked would she be satisfied.

Max looked relieved when they finally reached their destination. “Please let someone know if there’s anything you need,” he said, and dipped a hand into the pocket of his overalls, coming up with two long pasteboard ropes of tickets, brightly colored and fantastic in their solidity. “Miss Juniper said to tell you that you don’t necessarily need tickets, since you’re family and all, but that there’s been a lot of turnover since you performed here, and she’d rather you didn’t have to fight with any ride operators that don’t know who you are. You’re supposed to have a nice time tonight.”

“Aren’t you just the sweetest thing?” Fran took the tickets with one hand, leaning up onto her toes and pressing a kiss to Max’s cheek. His cheeks and ears flamed red. She dropped back to the flats of her feet, the tickets disappearing into her pocket. “Where’s Junie tonight?”

“Fortunes, same as always,” said Max. He bowed clumsily, managed a quick, “Enjoy your meal,” and turned to walk away as quickly as he could without being rude.

Fran sighed. “Skittish boy. He’ll learn.” She turned back to Jonathan, that performer’s smile slapped back onto her face. “Well, city boy? What are you waiting for?”

“I’m the tourist here,” he said. “You’ll have to lead me.”

“It’s this way.” She moved like she was going to grab his wrist, but stopped herself at the last moment, turning it into a beckoning gesture instead. Jonathan sighed as he followed her into the dim canvas cavern of the main tent.

Camp tables were set up in uneven lines leading up to the tent supports, each of them matched with a pair of rough-topped benches that looked like they could use a good sanding, and maybe a coat or three of paint. A few of them were occupied by carnies, eating bowls of stew or brown-bread sandwiches, but most were empty this close to show time. People had things that they needed to be doing.

Feeling more like an intruder than ever, Jonathan followed Fran across the room to a small kitchen setup, where a massive pot of stew simmered over the larger cousin of their trailer’s portable range. There was a platter next to it, heaped high with biscuits. Fran didn’t ask him what he wanted, or even if he was hungry; she just grabbed a bowl, ladled it full of the pot’s thick, savory contents, and thrust it into his hands. “Spoons are other side of the biscuits,” she said. “You should nab a few. They smell like the same recipe I grew up on, and there’s not much that’s tastier, short of your Ma’s cottage pie.”

“She’s had a lot of time to practice,” said Jonathan, taking his bowl without protest. He was hungry, and so he paused to snap two of the much-lauded biscuits before stepping to the side and watching as Fran expertly filled a bowl for herself. Part of him was pleased to see that she apparently intended on eating as long as they were with the carnival, rather than just picking at whatever was put in front of her. The rest of him was more concerned than anything else. Concerned about the way that she was smiling. Concerned about the way that she seemed to have put the reason that they had come looking for the carnival out of her mind the second they saw the poster on the side of that barn. Concerned, when he came right down to it, about Fran.

She led the way to an open table and he followed, sitting down next to her and stealing small glances her way as he ate his stew, which was that curious blend of meats and root vegetables best described as tasting “brown.” He thought he could detect notes of cow, goat, and raccoon, but he couldn’t be sure
of any of them. Fran didn’t seem to mind the combination of flavors. She ate quickly and with gusto, taking heaping bites of stew and chasing them down with equally large bites of biscuit. And she never stopped smiling. Somehow, that ever-present smile was even worse than the sorrow she had been wearing like a cloak since the night that Daniel left them.

“See somethin’ green, city boy?”

Fran’s voice snapped him out of his single-minded regard of her. Jonathan shook himself back into the present, replying quickly, “No, nothing green. I doubt this stew has seen anything green in years.”

“Don’t be squeamish,” said Fran. “Lizards are green, aren’t they?” She snatched his half-empty bowl before he could come up with a reply, sliding smoothly from the bench. “I’ll just rinse these off, and then we can see the show. Junie was good enough to give us tickets for the midway, and it’d be a shame to let them go to waste, don’t you think?”

Jonathan wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting when he’d agreed to accompany his wife on a search for the Campbell Family Carnival. No-name stew and midway rides hadn’t even made the list. Still, if this was what she needed... “I have always enjoyed a good Ferris wheel,” he said, standing in turn. “They afford such an excellent view of the surrounding landscape.”

“Always thinkin’ like a hunter, aren’t you?” Fran’s tone was fond, but her smile flickered for a moment, tearing just enough to let him see the aching chasm of the grief she was trying so hard to conceal. Then she straightened, and her smile returned, all the brighter for having wavered. “There’s no hunting tonight. Anyone we see here is under the protection of the carnival, you understand me?”

“We try not to hunt at carnivals anyway, save under very special circumstances,” he said. “The routewitches don’t like it, and we don’t like upsetting the routewitches.”

“You hunted at a circus once,” Fran said.

“Special circumstances,” Jonathan countered. “Now let’s go see that midway.”

There is something eternal about the carnival, Jonathan reflected, as he held Fran’s hand and let her pull him through the bone yard toward the distant sound of calliope music, the distant glitter of the midway lights, which were only now starting to become visible as the night descended all around them. It might change its face and form to suit the times, but the show itself went on forever, stretching from one end of human history to the other, an uninterrupted map of midways and maze of side show curiosities. When the last embers of the sun died, there would be a carnival still glowing bright in the ashes of the world, filled with people trying to get one more ride in before they went to their rewards.

The thought was comforting and terrifying all at once, because if the carnival was eternal, that made it a kind of parasite, a living thing with human bodies for cells. It was almost a cryptid in its own right, a form of life so vast and slow that the mind could barely comprehend it, and so reduced it to a fun-fair dazzle of light and sound and harmless motion.

But all living things must eat, and if the carnival was a predator, on what flesh did it feed?

All this raced through Jonathan’s mind as Fran dragged him onto the midway, and the sights and smells of carnival shut down much of his capacity for rational thought. The dry dirt beneath their feet was tempered with thick handfuls of hay, creating the illusion of softness, and tiny twinkling lights were
strung between the booths, glimmering in the early evening like captive fireflies. This was another world, and if it was a hungry one, well. He had dealt with hungry things before.

Fran was all frantic animation and need that he had no way of filling. She pulled him here and there, now exclaiming over a game that hadn’t been there the last time she visited, now peeping through the back curtains of a sideshow. There could not, he reflected, have been a better advertisement for the carnival’s delights than his manic wife; he could see the pain tamped down behind her joy, but the townsfolk who haunted the midway like timid shadows didn’t know her well enough for that. To them, she was a beacon to greater delights, and before long, Fran had picked up a trail of people who probably didn’t even realize that they were following her path through the midway.

They were crossing the stretch of open path between the guess-your-weight and the goldfish toss when Fran’s fingers slipped from his and he found himself suddenly rudderless in the middle of the midway. Jonathan stopped, blinking, and watched as his wife was swept away on her self-made tide.

Footsteps beside him alerted him to Juniper’s arrival a moment before she said, “She’s broken. She doesn’t want us to know that, but I know her. What happened?”

That was the question Jonathan had been waiting for since they arrived at the carnival, but when he opened his mouth to speak, no sound came out. It was like his voice had deserted him. He looked at Juniper and shook his head, wordless in the midway light.

Juniper frowned, taking in the details of his expression. “Come with me,” she said, and turned, walking toward the nearest attraction. Jonathan followed her. She pulled the canvas backdrop of the wood-frame game booth aside, creating an opening, and slipped through into the hidden space behind the midway. It was a narrow path, lit only by the light seeping in from the midway, but once they were there, with the majority of the sound blocked by the structures around them, Jonathan found that he could breathe again.

“Better?” asked Juniper.

“Quiet,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Juniper cautioned. “I don’t like the way you look either, but it’s Fran that I’m worried about. What happened?”

Jonathan removed his glasses, wiping them on the tail of his shirt. Even in the dimness, he didn’t want to see her face. “We came here because Fran wanted to talk to you. She said that you’ve always had difficulty with the restless dead.”

“I’m a routwitch,” said Juniper. “It comes with the territory. Road ghosts follow us everywhere we go, and most of them are harmless. They’re just looking to have a little fun.”

“Road ghosts are generally harmless, but it was another kind of ghost that brought us here, to you.” Jonathan put his glasses back on, bringing the world back into vivid focus, and looked at her gravely. “Daniel died five nights ago.”

Juniper’s hand flew to her mouth, her eyes going wide and round. She didn’t say anything.

“The house wards keep out the dead and can give warning of certain other things, but neither of my parents is a witch; they do what they can with what they have, and they’ve never been able to cast wide-spectrum protections. We thought we were safe. We thought that with four adults who regularly sleep with firearms under their pillows, nothing could possibly catch us unawares.” Jonathan’s laugh
was short and bitter. “We weren’t counting on something that could move silently in shadows. A bogeyman. Paid assassin. I think… I truly believe that he was sent to kill one of us. Myself, or my parents, or Fran.” He had to believe that, because if he thought for an instant that someone had paid to have his son killed, he would go mad.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” breathed Juniper.

“We were all very soundly asleep,” said Jonathan. His voice had taken on a detached quality, like he was describing a scene that had happened years before. “Daniel screamed. He did that quite a lot—he was only three—but this was different. He didn’t sound hungry, or lonely, or wet. He didn’t even sound frightened. He sounded terrified. That was the worst of it. That was the unnecessary part.”

Juniper flinched. “What? How can you say—”

“Most bogeymen aren’t killers, but the ones that are tend to be very good at what they do,” said Jonathan, continuing without pause. “Their victims never wake up. They can enter a house, kill their target, and leave again, all without being seen. But this one… when he realized he was in the wrong room, he saw a chance to harm us anyway. He woke Daniel up. Our little boy saw his killer’s face.”

There was so much more than he couldn’t describe, because he didn’t have the words for it. Oh, there were words, but none of them could do the job. None of them were sufficient to explain the sounds that had come from Daniel’s room, those horrible snapping, squishing sounds—

Juniper’s arms were around his shoulders, holding him up. He hadn’t seen her moving, but he hadn’t felt himself begin to cry, either. Jonathan pressed his face against her shoulder, standing in the shadows behind the midway, and wept without making a sound.

It wasn’t until she was on the merry-go-round for the second time that Fran realized that Johnny was no longer anywhere to be seen. Her heart sank, a sickening feeling accompanied by the sharp conviction that he was gone—that he had taken his horse and returned to Buckley, leaving her and her broken heart with the carnival, where they so clearly belonged.

Fran clutched the pole of her bobbing pony a little tighter, trying to force the thought from her mind. No. Johnny wouldn’t do that to her; Johnny loved her. They were having a bad patch right now, and that was more than understandable, but he wouldn’t just leave her. He was a good man. She could break his heart a hundred times, and still he’d never leave her alone. Maybe that wasn’t a good thing—maybe that was a sign that the right thing to do would be to tell him she was staying and he was going, before she could give him that hundredth broken heart—but that was the way things were.

Still, there was no Johnny on the carousel, and no Johnny in the crowd surrounding it. Only the bright lights of the midway and the faces of strangers met her searching eyes. As she looked, she started to realize just how exposed she was, sitting high and pretty on her painted stallion. Anyone who wanted to take a shot could have it, and there was nothing she could do to defend herself.

When the merry-go-round came gliding to a halt, she slid down from her horse and made for the exit, moving a little faster than was strictly necessary. She needed to find Johnny; she needed to get to cover. She needed—

“There you are, Frannie.” There was no accusation in Juniper’s voice: she sounded as calm as she
always had, as if finding Fran on the carousel were still a nightly occurrence, and not something that happened only under very special circumstances. “I was getting worried about you. Your husband’s gone back to the trailer to rest.”

Fran frowned. “Johnny’s gone to rest? Pardon me for doubting, but that doesn’t sound much like him.” He was always adamant about never leaving anyone alone when they were in the field.

“I told him it was for the best, and he believed me.” Juniper slid her arm through Fran’s. “He’s plum worn out, the poor man. He’s not as good at being in pain as he thinks he is.”

“He told you.” Fran didn’t pull away, but she stiffened, her body going from calm pliancy to tense hardness in an instant. “This isn’t how I wanted you to find out.”

“You came here to tell me.” Juniper started to walk, pulling Fran with her. She was the slimmer and softer of the two women, with none of Fran’s combat training or working muscles, but somehow, she kept the other woman captive with nothing more than a bit of pressure. “As long as someone did, that means you’ve accomplished what you came here for, doesn’t it?”

Fran was silent for a moment, allowing herself to be led away from the light and music of the merry-go-round. She looked back only once, filling her eyes with the motion of the painted ponies and the crowd surrounding them.

“Most of them are dead, you know,” said Juniper calmly. They stepped off of the midway and into the shadows of the staff passages, and still she kept on walking, tugging Fran inexorably toward the bone yard. “Opening night is tomorrow. Half the people out there are locals looking for work or willing to risk things not being quite shipshape, and the other half are haunts. Road ghosts and local wraiths solid enough to pass for folks. I even saw a crossroads ghost, although he didn’t stop to say hello or pay for his tickets. Always in a hurry, crossroads ghosts.”

“I always thought you were kidding when you said things like that,” said Fran softly.

“You know better now,” said Juniper.

“I guess I do.”

They walked on for a little while in silence, until finally Juniper said, “He’s scared for you, Fran. He doesn’t have any practice grieving like this, and he doesn’t know how to help you. Poor boy doesn’t even know how to help himself. You need to be helping each other, but you’re both so lost in this that you can’t figure out where to start.”

For the first time, Fran tried to pull away. “Don’t you even pretend you know what this feels like, Junie. He was my son. I lost my son.”

“I know.” Juniper kept walking, and her grip was like steel. “I am so sorry for your loss, baby girl. My daughter hasn’t shown up yet—she’s three years and a drunken night in Bar Harbor away from here, and I wouldn’t hurry her if I could—but that doesn’t mean that I can’t ache for you, and for what you’ve paid to live the life you’ve had. You always knew there would be costs.”

“No one told me they were going to be this high,” mumbled Fran.

“You get what you pay for,” Juniper replied.

The scenery changed around them, going from the painted flats and cleaning supplies of the carnival’s
veiled “backstage” area to the first simple trailers of the bone yard. No one moved there. Everyone was either at work or sleeping the last few hours before their shift began. Juniper’s pace remained steady, unhurried by anything around her—not even the increasingly shaky woman she was holding by the arm.

“Why did you come here, Fran?” asked Juniper. “What did you hope we could give to you?”

“I wanted…” Fran stopped. Finishing the sentence felt like opening a box that she would never be able to close. She looked at Juniper hopelessly, and shook her head.

“We’re your family, and you’re always welcome here,” Juniper said. “No matter what happens out there in the rest of the world, we keep the doors open for you. We keep them open for everyone who leaves us. And if you ever come to stay, well, we’ll be happy to have you. But you’re not here to stay, Fran. Not today. Maybe not ever.”

“I don’t want to go back to just being sad all the time. I don’t think my heart can bear it.”

Juniper stopped in front of the sleek silver trailer that had been Fran’s, seven years and a lifetime before. “That’s good,” she said, letting go of Fran’s arm and reaching up to open the door. “No one ever gets to go back to anything they’ve left behind. Now come in, if you’re coming, and we can answer the things you didn’t want to ask me under someone else’s stars.”

Juniper climbed the two short steps into the trailer, vanishing with a swish of her skirts. Fran hesitated for a long moment, her feet grounded in the dirt, the Ohio sky spread out above her like an admonition.

Then she nodded to herself, and followed Juniper inside.

The trailer walls were a maze of words. Pages cut from books and magazines were pasted in crazy quilt blocks, overlapping until it was difficult to tell where one line ended and the next began. Carnival posters, flyers, even theater playbills were all mixed into the design, turning the walls into a ghost trap capable of catching and keeping even the strongest of spirits. Fran looked at the layers and judged them to have come in twenty deep, near doubled from the last time she’d been inside this trailer. She looked to Juniper, who shrugged.

“We’re getting a reputation in certain circles,” she said. “Some people say our freaks are too realistic, that our rides don’t break down often enough, and they send a few little friends of their own to have a look at the operation. I don’t like it when the dead look in on me without being invited. It’s rude, and you know I can’t abide rudeness.”

“I do,” said Fran, with the flicker of a smile. She moved to take a seat at the chipped oak table that took up more than half the front of the trailer. The motion made her stomach twinge, and she touched it, wincing a little. The last time she’d been here, she’d been nine months pregnant with Daniel. She’d settled herself in that same chair, and she’d waited to hear her fortune…

Nausea washed over her. She heard the clatter of a chair hitting the floor, and then Juniper’s hands were locked around her wrists. Fran looked up, eyes wide and haunted, to find Junie no more than two feet away, holding her tight.

“Calm down, sugar,” Juniper said. “You came here for a reason. There are no ghosts here. You are not being haunted. Now I need you to tell me what it was. Until you tell me, I can’t help.”
Fran stared into the face of her oldest friend, her eyes slowly filling with tears. Finally, in a small, wounded voice, she said, “He died, Junie. How can that be real? He was so little. We tried so hard to keep him safe. We never took him anywhere that might be dangerous. He wasn’t even old enough to hold a knife. But he died all the same, because of who we are. Because of what we do. He died.”

“It happens to the best of us,” said Juniper, letting go of Fran’s hands before moving to pick up the chair that had been knocked over when Fran jumped back to her feet. “Death is what comes when the show finally can’t keep going any longer. Some people just get more encores than others.”

“Daniel should have had all the encores,” said Fran, sinking down into the righted chair and looking sadly up at Juniper. “He was…he was the best boy, Junie. I was going to bring him to meet you in a year or two, when he was old enough not to be frightened by all the things he didn’t recognize. I just knew you were going to love him. Everybody loved him.”

“How could he not be the best boy? He was yours.” Juniper moved to sit at the other side of the table. She moved her hands, and was suddenly holding a deck of slightly oversized cards. They were hand-painted poster board, irregularly cut and slightly water damaged by the painting process. “I always knew you’d have wonderful children, Fran. You were made to be a mother. It’s just that not every child can stay, no matter how much we want them to.”

Fran dropped her head, her hair falling into her face. “But did we do this? The thing that killed him… it would never have come to the house if it weren’t for me and Johnny. What we do with our lives. Did we kill our baby?”

“Oh, Fran.” Juniper began to shuffle the cards, her hands moving with the smooth ease of long practice. “No. You didn’t kill him; no. What you and Johnny do with yourselves…you save lives every day. Human lives and inhuman lives. Parents and children. You make the world a better place.”

“A monster came into my home and killed my little boy,” said Fran. “How does that make the world a better place?”

“It doesn’t,” said Juniper simply. “It was a tragedy. You’ll carry it with you for the rest of your life, and no matter how often you try to put it down, it’s always going to be there, waiting for you. But you’ve got a life to get through. Tragedy or no, you’re still here.”

“Johnny…”

“Is grieving, just like you are. His grief is no better or worse than yours. It’s not worth more. But it’s not worth less, either.”

Fran sighed. “I just don’t…this time last week, I was somebody’s mama. How do you move on from that?”

“You don’t.” Juniper stopped talking, although she continued to shuffle the cards, which made soft paper sounds as they rubbed together. After a time, Fran raised her head. Juniper met her eyes and said, calmly, “Why did you come here, Fran? You didn’t ride all this way to give me some of your grieving, although you know I’d take it if I could. Why did you come?”

“The dead…they follow you.”

Juniper nodded. “Yes. They always have. Poor, lost things that they are.”
“Is my Danny…” Fran stopped, swallowing, and took a moment to compose herself before she asked, “Is my Daniel here? Is he following you, or is he resting peacefully, like he should have been resting that night when the bogeyman came and took his life? I need to know, Junie. I can’t…I can’t let him go until I know he’s really gone.”

Juniper stopped shuffling. Without saying a word, she flipped over the top card, putting it face-up on the table. The painting showed a small boy, snugly nestled in his bed. “Rock-a-bye baby,” she said. “He’s not here, Frannie. I never got to meet him, in this world or the next. I can’t promise you that he’s resting peacefully—no one can promise that about anyone—but I can swear that wherever he’s resting, it’s not here with me. He’s moved on.”

Fran looked at her, eyes wide and wounded, before bursting into tears. Juniper put the cards aside and stood, walking around the table to her friend. Then she knelt, and held her, and together, the two women cried the evening dry.

The sound of the trailer door opening was not enough to wake Jonathan: Juniper’s tea had been stronger than he’d expected, and he’d fallen asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. Even the soft swish of clothes hitting the floor and the rattle of weapons being placed atop the dresser was not enough to pull him from the sweet arms of his dreaming.

But then a body slid into the bed beside him, and the sweet smell of Fran’s shampoo was tickling his nostrils, so like a dream in its welcome closeness. Jonathan opened his eyes enough to squint through his eyelashes as he rolled over. Fran was there, her own eyes still open, and still filled with the fathomless sadness that had been shining there for the better part of the past week.

“To sleep, city boy,” she whispered. “I’ll tell you all about it in the morning.”

Jonathan blinked. And then, deciding that if this was a dream, it was a dream he was perfectly happy to encourage, he closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

He woke up alone.

Surprise was followed quickly by crushing disappointment. Jonathan pushed himself into a sitting position, and frowned when he saw that the dresser drawers were open and, more importantly, empty. He was about to start questing for his trousers when the trailer door banged open to reveal Fran, fully dressed and holding a plate of what smelled like bacon and scrambled eggs.

“Good morning,” she said. “Brought breakfast. Junie wants to say goodbye before we go, but I figure that if we leave by noon, we’ll be home before your folks have time to send out a search party.”

Jonathan blinked. “Are we leaving, then?”

“I think so.” Fran sat down on the edge of the bed, offering him the plate. Still blinking and bemused, he took it. “It was nice to see everyone again, and I always feel better when I talk to Junie. But I think I want to go home.”
“Is it still home?” he asked, and the ocean of hurt in his words was enough to make her wince.

“As long as you’re there, it will be,” she said quietly. “Going to be a sad home for a while. Going to be a bit of a haunted one, even if there aren’t any ghosts there. And I’m going to count on your father to figure out who paid that bastard to come after us, because there’s a lot of repaying wants done. But my home is where you are, and I’d miss Buckley if I went away forever.”

“Did Juniper give you the answers that you wanted?”

Fran nodded. “She did. He’s resting, most like. And I’m still holding you to your word—this never happens again. I couldn’t come back from this a second time. But right here and right now, I think we can still get through it together. I think we can find our way back to a place where we can breathe.”

“I see.” Jonathan reached out, putting his hand over hers, and smiled. “I would like that very much.”

“Me, too,” said Fran, smiling back. “So eat your breakfast and get your trousers on, city boy. I want to go home.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, and reached for the plate.

Juniper stood at the very edge of the bone yard, watching Fran and Jonathan riding away. Max stood next to her, not saying a word. He didn’t know what would have been appropriate, given the circumstances.

“Our daughters are going to be the best friends in the world you know,” Juniper said, voice as distant as her gaze. “They’ll go to school together. They’ll save each other’s lives a hundred times before things go bad. But I’m never going to see Frannie again, and it breaks my heart to know that.”

“I’m sorry,” said Max.

“So am I,” said Juniper, and turned, and walked back toward the midway.

The show, as always, still needed to go on.