The Star of New Mexico

An InCryptid Story
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by

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It had taken nearly two weeks to arrange the funeral. The funeral home hadn't been happy about that, especially after Alexander made it clear that Fran was not to be embalmed: she was going to go back to the ground, ashes to ashes and dust to dust, the way that nature intended. Most people chose either preservation or a quick burial, not this in-between thing that left a body slowly solidifying in the funeral home freezer.

"We're not set up for long term storage," the funeral home director had said.

"Please. Fran had family all over this country, and they need to pay their respects," Alexander had replied, and pressed a roll of bills into the other man's hand.

Maybe it was courtesy, or maybe it was avarice, but there hadn't been any more complaints after that.

Two weeks: sixteen days, all told, from finding her body to the morning that Fran was to be buried. It was a long time, where organizing a funeral was concerned: longer by far than most people liked to keep their dead up out of the soil anymore. It was no time at all when it was set against all the days that she wasn't going to live, all the hours that she wasn't going to walk through as a living woman. Two weeks was nothing. It was a slander, an insult, a lie, and sometimes Alexander found himself wondering if he wasn't dragging his feet, just a little, to keep her with them that tiny bit much longer.

But it wasn't just him, and he knew that. Two weeks was the time it took for Arturo and Elena to find someone to babysit their son, who was too young for this sort of thing, even if they'd had room in their car; they were driving down from Chicago with Asta and Chruse from the Carmichael Hotel in their back seat. Aldo was a tractable child, and remarkably well-adjusted considering the kind of company his parents kept. Asking him to sit through an all-day car ride with a pair of gorgons was still a little much.

Two weeks was the time it took for Fran's old carnival home to turn around and make its way back to Michigan, flags furled and banners undisplayed. Alexander had called in a dozen favors to locate the Campbell Family Carnival before he committed to a burial date, and he didn't regret any of them, although he thought he might well go to his grave with the sound of Juniper's sobs still ringing in his ears, turned tinny and thin by the phone lines.

Two weeks was the time it took to make a thousand phone calls, send a thousand letters—or at least that was what it felt like. Two weeks was a lifetime, and it was all that they had left.

It had taken nearly two weeks to arrange the funeral, and a few more days than that for everyone to make it to Buckley. The funeral home had complained again. Alexander had given them another roll of bills, had told them to keep Fran as fresh as they could, but that he would understand if it had to be a closed-casket ceremony. They were preparing her for her grave, after all, not for her wedding day. It was all right if they couldn't look at her as they said goodbye.

Two weeks, and a few more days. It wasn't such a long time.

It wasn't any time at all.

The kitchen light came on shortly after midnight on the night before Frances Healy's funeral. Juniper Campbell, who had been keeping her own quiet vigil over a campfire in the back field, looked away
from the flames and toward the smaller, sadder light. Then, gathering her skirts in her hands like a little girl gathering flowers, she stood and started toward the house.

Jonathan was so absorbed in staring at the surface of his coffee that he didn't hear her footsteps on the porch. The sound of her knuckles rapping against the back door made him jump, sloshing hot liquid across his hand. It burned. He looked at it for a moment, trying to decide how he should respond, before he stood and moved to let her in.

"You're awake," he said, frowning. "Why are you awake?"

For her part, all Juniper could do was stare. It had been Alexander who met the carnival at the end of the driveway, who had put his arms around Juniper and held her while she sobbed. And it had been Enid who helped them get settled in the field where they would be sleeping until after Fran was laid to rest. For all the coming and going around the house, Juniper hadn't seen Jonathan at all, not up until this moment.

"I couldn't sleep," she said. She couldn't think of anything else to say. All the words seemed to be withering in her throat, turning into ashes.

Jonathan looked like a man who had already consigned himself to the grave beside his wife. His face was pale and drawn, and he had clearly lost weight in the past two weeks; his cheeks were hollow, and the dark circles under his eyes made them look as if they had sunk into his head. He was a skeleton still dressed in skin. From the way he drooped, driven downward by the weight of the world, he wasn't going to be alive for very long.

"Ah," he said, finally. "I suppose that means you might as well come in." He turned and walked away from her, heading back to the table. "There's coffee on the stove, and Bundt cake from the ladies of the Library Auxiliary. I'm not sure when baked goods became the appropriate way of saying 'I'm sorry your wife is dead.' I may never eat another cookie as long as I live."

His voice was as colorless and drained as the rest of him. It was the voice of something that had been pressed between two sheets of paper until all the life was leached out of it, leaving only a shadow behind. Juniper stepped into the kitchen, shutting the door gingerly behind herself. Somewhere in this house, a little girl was sleeping—a little girl who would, according to Juniper's cards, one day give up everything she had because she didn't know how to give up on love. Juniper had wondered how any child of Fran's could grow up that way. Now, looking at Jonathan, she was finally beginning to understand.

"Johnny, have you eaten today?"

Jonathan raised his head and looked at the clock above the stove. "No," he said finally. "But as the day is only twenty minutes old, I don't feel like I've really failed at any basic tasks. Did you come in here just to ask if I'd eaten?"

"No," said Juniper, settling at the table across from him. "Under the circumstances, though, it seems like the best thing I can do. Did you eat yesterday?"

Jonathan's silence was all the answer she needed.

"Fran wouldn't want you to starve yourself, you know," said Juniper. "She would have wanted better for you than that."

"How do you know?" asked Jonathan. "Did she come to you?" A new hunger lit in his eyes. He had
been at the carnival: he had seen the writing on her walls, the wards and charms that kept the dead from troubling her. If Fran's ghost was haunting anyone, it would have been Juniper.

"I'm sorry, Johnny, but no," said Juniper.

Jonathan sagged in his chair, all the light going out of him. It was painful to see. Juniper didn't let herself turn away. This, too, was part of losing Fran: watching all the things she'd made better with her presence fade blacker than they'd been before she came along. "Then what use are you?" he asked, reaching for his coffee.

Juniper leaned across the table to pull the mug out of his reach. The smell of whiskey hit her almost immediately, making it plain how much he'd been doctoring his drink. She couldn't blame him. She also couldn't let him continue, not when they were burying Fran in the morning.

"I don't know what use I am, but I know that I'm here because I loved Fran just as much as you did," said Juniper. "She was my sister in everything but blood, and I'm not going to let you bring a hangover to her funeral. It's disrespectful to her, and to your memories. You'd hate yourself forever."

"I'm already going to hate myself forever, Juniper," he replied. "I let her go into those woods by herself."

Juniper snorted. "As if you could have stopped her? There wasn't a man or woman alive who could stop Frannie once she had her heart set on something. She was never going to let you keep her safe, like some bird in a cage. She was happy the day she left with you. She said she'd finally figured out what she wanted to do with her life. If you can't see that, if you can't see how much she loved you, I don't know what to say to you."

"Then maybe you shouldn't say anything," he said. "I don't care if she loved me. I failed her."

Juniper looked at him solemnly for a long moment before she pushed his spiked coffee back toward him and stood. "I am so sorry for your loss, Johnny, but I'm going to be a lot sorrier if you don't figure out how much you have left to lose before it's too late. Come to me if you want your cards read. I'd be happy to remind you that you have a future. I'll see you in the morning."

She turned and walked out of the kitchen. Jonathan watched her go, and watched her figure dwindle across the yard as she walked past the window. Then he picked up his coffee and took a long sip. There were still hours to burn before the morning came and they put Fran in the ground forever. This was their last night in the same world, and he'd be damned before he wasted it on sleeping.

In the attic, the mice were entering the sixteenth day of their vigil. Candles burned on their penny-lined boulevards, shrouded by bits of colored glass that threw bright shadows on the walls and ceiling. Novices played the drums, or plunked at their tiny stringed instruments, which weren't quite harps and weren't quite cellos, but were something unique and strange, all sharp notes with no bottom end. Everywhere, the members of the priesthood led their clustered followers in quiet reflection, recreating every minute of the Violent Priestess's time with them.

One of the old priests stood by the baptismal font, touching the sacred waters to the ears and whiskers of the babies who had been born on the day Fran. All those children would be sworn into the service of the church, regardless of where they fell in the birthing order, regardless of how many siblings had already been sworn into the priesthood. They had been born as the light of a beloved Priestess was
leaving the world forever. No others would ever know Her glory, or be held, transfixed, in the cathedral chamber of Her palm. There were few enough ways for ones so small as the Aeslin to remember ones so great as their gods. This was a small sacrifice to be made in the honor of one they had loved so dearly, and so deeply, and for so brutally short a time.

The high priest of the Violent Priestess looked down from his room at the top of the cathedral, watching the process of mourning as it spiraled through the city. He could feel the weight of every one of his thirty-seven years pressing down upon him, like an unwanted cloak. How had he, who was once so young and filled with ideas of reform and reconstruction, become so very old? And how had time, which had shown him such cruelty, not allowed him one single, perfect mercy, and taken him before their beloved Priestess could be cut down? It was not fair. It was not right.

The high priest looked out upon the community he had served for all the days of his life, and for the first time, he felt his faith waver.

"Master?" The voice belonged to one of his most trusted novice priests, a young mouse, still bright of eye and quick of claw. The high priest turned, studying the novice for what felt like the first time.

He was young. He was enthusiastic. He was newly sworn to the path of the Violent Priestess: his mind was still open to all the possibilities of the world. And as he felt the measuring eye of his superior on him, he did not droop, but forced his whiskers forward, telegraphing his willingness to do whatever might be required of him.

"How may I serve?" he asked.

The old priest sighed. It was a deep, lonely sound, and seemed to travel from the very heart of him before it escaped into the air. "The God of Uncommon Sense will be coming to us very soon, to carry those who have been chosen to the burial grounds, there to see the Violent Priestess laid to rest among the bodies of those who came before Her."

The young priest nodded quickly. "She is to be buried alongside the God of Early Arrivals and Earlier Departures, is She not?"

"Yes. She will be rejoined with Him, and He will lead her to the Heavens, where She will await the faithful evermore." The words were dust and ashes in his mouth. Yes, She would ascend to the Heavens, there to share Her teachings with the Aeslin who had lived and died before She came to them, but what of him? What of all Her priesthood, who had served Her so faithfully, and asked only that they be allowed to die before She was forced to leave them?

The young priest waited patiently for the venerable mouse in front of him to speak again. Patience was not yet a skill that came easy to him. He needed years more practice before he would be able to stand the long vigils: the Remembrance of the Well-Groomed Priestess, the Journey of the God of Hard Work and Sunshine, the painful Parting from the God of Bitter Honesty and the Obedient Priestess. He would officiate them all in his time, and he knew that his eagerness held him back, but oh, how he longed for the mysteries.

"When the God comes, you will go to Him," said the old priest finally. "You will tell Him that you have been chosen to observe the final rites, and to remember them unto the colony. He will not question you." The God of Unexpected Situations was sunk as deep in mourning as any of them—deeper, perhaps. He had never loved the Violent Priestess as Her congregation had, for the love between Gods and Priestesses was based in the flesh, not in the spirit. But He had loved Her all the days of Her life, and He would be Her eternal consort in the Heavens. His mourning was well-earned, and would be respected.
The young priest slicked his whiskers back in shock and confusion. "But I am not the head of Her priesthood," he protested. "This honor is yours. You should stand witness to Her departure."

The old priest, who remembered a ride on a train, and the smell of popcorn in a circus ring, and the bemused delight of a young woman who was not yet a Priestess, but had always been destined for worship, shook his head. "No," he said. "I saw Her arrive, on a white horse, with diamonds in Her hair. I will not see Her go. I will not see the curtain fall upon the ring. I have done everything else that She has ever asked of me, but I will not do this. Because I loved Her, I will not bury Her, and because I will not bury Her, I will not be the head of Her priesthood any longer."

He looked down at the bracelet of gimmerack beads he had worn around his left forepaw since he returned to Buckley triumphant, tucked in the saddlebag of their newest Priestess. How She had shone and sparkled in the light! She had been beautiful beyond all words. She had stolen his heart, and now She had taken it with her down into the dust.

"You must lead Her faithful now," he said, rolling the bracelet slowly off and turning to offer it to the young priest. "You must keep Her scripture, and remember Her as I cannot. I loved Her too much to live in a world where She is gone."

The young priest closed his eyes for a moment, bowing his head in understanding. His teachers had warned him of this: that sometimes, those who served a living God or Priestess could not survive their passing, but would grieve themselves into death. He had never expected to live to see such a thing…but then, who did? They knew their Gods were mortal. That did not mean they were ever prepared to see their Gods struck down.

"I understand," he said, raising his head and opening his eyes as he held his paws out to receive the bracelet. The old priest pressed it into his successor's waiting claws, barely hesitating before he pulled his own paw away. The young priest slipped the bracelet solemnly on. It was loose, but it would come to fit with time. Oh, yes; it would come to fit.

The old mouse—who was a priest no longer—said nothing more after that, for there was nothing more to say. He simply turned, head bowed, and walked out of the chamber.

He would be dead by morning. The young priest knew that. Still, he stayed where he was, looking at the bracelet on his wrist, and feeling responsibility settle over him like a shroud.

He would have to learn patience quickly after all.

Morning found Alice sitting at the breakfast table and staring into her oatmeal like it had done something to offend her. She was dressed all in black: black shoes, black dress, even a black ribbon in her hair, all of it sewn by Enid during the weeks between Fran's death and this, the day of her long-awaited funeral. Enid was at the stove, frying eggs that spat and hissed like demons in the pan. She wasn't sure that she could eat them. Her stomach was so sour that it felt as if it were going to climb up the back of her throat and escape. But she had to do something. Normalcy was the last refuge she had against what was coming.

"Alice, sweetie, did you want some brown sugar for that?" she asked, glancing over at her granddaughter. Alice hadn't been eating much since her mother died. Enid couldn't fault her for that. When her own mother had died, she'd already been a mother herself, and she'd still gone a week without putting anything more substantial than milky tea in her mouth. "I can get you some, if you'd
"It's not Sunday." Alice sounded almost offended. She twisted in her seat to scowl at her grandmother. "I get brown sugar for my oatmeal on Sundays. Today is Friday. I should be at school. I go to school on Fridays."

Enid's heart, which had taken a pounding since the Wednesday morning when she walked into the woods and found her daughter-in-law's body, felt like it was going to burst in her chest. She took the eggs off the burner, setting the pan to the side where it wouldn't start a grease fire, and walked over to kneel next to Alice's chair. Her knees protested the motion. Enid ignored them.

"Honey, do you understand why you're not at school today?"

Alice nodded sullenly. "We have to go to a funeral."

"Do you understand what that is?"

"It's for Mama." Alice looked away from her oatmeal again, this time hopeful as she asked, "Is she coming home?"

Enid shook her head. "No, sweetheart," she said, for what felt like the thousandth time since the world turned upside down. "Your mother is in Heaven now. She's gone, and she's not going to come home anymore."

"Because she died."

"Yes. Because she died."

"Mary died," said Alice, a note of triumph in her voice. "Mary comes to see me all the time. Is Mama with Mary now?"

Enid, who had been hoping to avoid the subject of Mary Dunlavy today, winced. "No, sweetheart, I don't think so. When Mary died, she..."

"I died on the road, Alice, and people who die on the road usually wind up restless," said Mary from the kitchen doorway. Enid turned. There was Alice's babysitter, still as young and pretty as she'd been on the day that she died. She was wearing a smart black dress, with clean black shoes and hose that didn't have any runs in it. Her hair, which had always been an improbable shade of white-blonde, was hidden under a little cloche hat and veil that might have been out of style, but did an excellent job of confusing Mary's identity. Those were the things you had to worry about, when you were a teenage girl who'd been dead for six years, visiting the township where you'd been born.

"Mary!" Alice flung herself out of her chair and ran past her grandmother to sling her arms around her babysitter's knees. She pressed her face against Mary's leg and chanted, "Don't leave don't leave don't leave."

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Mary. She looked at Enid as she said, "I thought you might like some help today."

"You have no idea." Enid stood slowly. "Would you like some eggs?"

"No, thank you. I stopped for breakfast before I came." Mary reached down to peel Alice's arms gently from around her legs before picking up the sniffling girl and balancing her against her hip. Alice responded by wrapping her arms around Mary's shoulders instead, hiding her face in Mary's shoulder.
"Is there anything I need to know?"

"Johnny isn't taking things very well. You may want to step carefully around him."

Mary nodded solemnly. "All right. Did you know that you had a carnival in the backyard?"

"Yes. It's Frannie's family. We wanted them to be here."

"One of them's a routewitch. She has so many anti-possession charms around the place that I had to walk all the way down to Main before I could find a safe way to approach the house. It's probably a smart precaution, but if you need me to be available to babysit for the next few days, I should probably haunt the living room until then."

"I'll talk to Alexander," said Enid. She stepped forward and put a hand on Mary's free shoulder. As always, the girl felt fully solid, just like she was one of the living. A pity it was a lie. "I'm glad you could be here."

"Fran was there when you buried me," said Mary. "It seemed only fair that I return the favor."

Enid laughed unsteadily. "Oh, Mary. I wish everyone felt like you."

Mary just smiled, and pressed a kiss to the top of Alice's head. There didn't seem to be anything left for her to say.

"Johnny? It's time." Alexander Healy stopped in the open door of the room his son and daughter-in-law had shared for the past thirteen years. Coming any further would have felt like sacrilege.

Jonathan was sitting on the edge of the bed, an old circus poster in his hands. The paper was tattered around the edges, but the image was still clear: a blonde woman on a white horse, her hair in perfect curls, her clothing covered with spangles. "I wasn't supposed to bring her home," he said quietly.

Alexander took another step into the room. He said nothing.

He didn't have to. "She was a job," said Jonathan, running his thumb along the curve of Fran's painted cheek. It was a decent likeness; the poster painter had probably been sweet on her. Most people were, once they got the chance to know her. "I was going to find out what was killing people in Arizona, and kill it if I had to, and then come home alone. I wasn't supposed to bring her home. I wasn't supposed to keep her. And I wasn't supposed to fall in love."

"Ah, John." Alexander shook his head wearily. "Son, if we'd ever had a choice about whether or not we fell in love, the human race would have died out centuries ago. It always hurts us in the end. That's what love is for."

"Is it worth it?" Jonathan looked up from the poster, his hands clenching convulsively tight, so that they wrinkled the paper into a series of seams and valleys. "Wouldn't it be better not to have to feel this... this...this hopelessness? We could be so much happier if we never fell in love."

"You don't mean that," said Alexander. "Or maybe you do, but it will pass. You have Alice. You have your memories of Fran. Those are worth everything."

"You'll forgive me if I disagree." Jonathan stood. He was wearing his suit, at least, and if he hadn't
shaved that morning, who could blame him? He was burying his wife. Even the most hide-bound souls could excuse a little impropriety. "I wasn't supposed to bring her home with me. I did, and now she's dead. There's nothing I can do that will take that back, or make it better."

"You can raise your daughter, and make sure that she remembers what a wonderful woman her mother was," said Alexander.

Jonathan looked at him levelly before finally, curtly, nodding. "Yes, I can. That's why, as soon as all this is settled, Alice and I will be leaving Buckley."

He walked past his father without another word, leaving Alexander gaping in his wake.

Most of the funeral guests—the Gucciards, the gorgons from the Carmichael Hotel, Lynn Gentling and Elaine Lindsay—had taken rooms at the bed and breakfast downtown, saying that it was easier than all of them trying to pile into the Healy house like it was some sort of architectural clown car. The director of the Buckley Township Funeral Home stood in front of the door and watched as vehicle after vehicle pulled into the parking lot and discharged their passengers.

Some were normal, like the large Italian man with the weeping woman on his arm. Others, like the two kerchief-wearing women who followed them, were a little more unusual. Something about the way they held themselves made his skin crawl and his feet yearn to carry him backward, away from danger.

Alexander Healy approached the door. He was followed by his wife, Enid, and by a young woman in black who was holding the granddaughter firmly in her arms. The director turned a plastic smile on the family. Alexander countered it by extending his hand, waiting for it to be shaken.

"Mr. Hagar. Thank you for everything you've done for us," he said, while the people streamed past around them. Some weren't even wearing black. Some were dressed in what frankly looked like carnival clothing, all bright colors and sequins, and while Roy Hagar had been in the funeral business for a very long time, he had never seen anything like this.

But he also knew how many funerals had been prevented by the presence of the Healys. All the Healys, including Fran, who was even now waiting for her last session with her adoring fans. Keeping her body fresh for two weeks had been a challenge, and one that he hoped never to face again. Still, never let it be said that Roy Hagar shied away from a legitimate request. "It was no trouble," he said, shaking Alexander's hand once before releasing it. "If you're sure my staff can't do anything further for you…"

"No," said Alexander. "This is a private service. Fran would have wanted it that way."

Roy, who knew when it was time to back away, nodded. "Very well. Just send someone to my office when it's time to head for the…" He paused, editing himself at the last moment. Bad enough the little girl had to bury her mother. She didn't need to hear the brutal details. "Send someone for me when it's time. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," said Alexander, and stepped past him into the cool, lilac-scented air of the funeral home. Enid followed him, and the girl in black—who looked so dauntingly familiar, in an unfamiliar way—followed her. When he turned to follow their progress, he found Alice watching him over the girl's shoulder. He raised a hand in an almost unconscious wave, and after a brief pause, she waved back.

Then the door swung shut behind her, and whatever came next, he was not privy to it.
It was a strange gathering, only half human, attended by ghosts and talking mice, by mermaids in the beginning stages of their transformations and by gorgons whose snakes twisted and tasted the air as they listened to the eulogies. It was so perfectly Fran that it made Enid's heart ache. She sat frozen in the stiff folding chair, her hands twisting together in her lap, and listened as person after person stepped forward to say what Fran had done for them, what she had done to transform their lives from something ordinary into something magnificent.

"She introduced me to the people who introduced me to my wife," said Arturo Gucciard.

"She made me understand that being dead didn't make me a bad person," said Mary Dunlavy.

"She reminded me that we have an obligation to care for our town," said Lynn Gentling.

"She left me," said Juniper Campbell. "She was my best friend, and she left me, because she met a man who looked at her like she was the evening star, and how could any woman resist the kind of life that he was offering her? So she left me, and I forgave her. That was just the kind of woman she was. She was always there until she wasn't, and you were better for her having been there at all."

Finally, it was Jonathan's turn to step up to the front of the room and tell the assembled what his wife had meant to him. Slowly, he stood, setting Alice back in Mary Dunlavy's lap, where she snuggled close and pressed her face into the dead girl's shoulder, seemingly unaware of the brutal irony of her action. He looked at Mary. Mary looked back, nothing but sorrow in her crossroads eyes, and shook her head. There was no answer for him there.

Jonathan Healy turned and walked up to the front of the room.

It was almost a miracle how many people were there, how many pairs of eyes, how many tight-clasped hands. He would never have guessed that they had touched so many people over the course of their time together, which felt at once too long and too short, like a contradiction in every sense of the word.

He took a deep breath. The room was silent, waiting to hear what he would say. And finally, he spoke.

"Frances Healy was my best friend, and my wife, and the mother of my children," he said. "She was also my partner, the person I trusted above all others to have my back. When I needed her, she was always there. I am grateful for the time we had together—I am, God, I am—but I don't know what I'm going to do without her. I never thought I would have to do this without her. Aw, Fran." He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. It did nothing to slow his tears. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

There were no more eulogies after that. In the end, there was nothing else left to say.

They put her in the ground.

Alice cried. Enid clutched Alexander's hand until his fingers ached.

Jonathan didn't say anything at all.
The wake, such as it was, was held at the Healy house, which hadn't seen that many people since Johnny and Fran were married, and might never see that many people again. It was still early enough in the year that there were patches of snow on the ground, but the members of the Campbell Family Carnival who hadn't known Fran well enough to attend her funeral had been busy with shovels and with tarps all day, and had pitched their largest tent square in the middle of the field behind the house. There was food, and drink, and plenty of places for people to sit. It seemed all but perfect, especially considering the narrow halls of the house, which seemed haunted in a way that had nothing at all to do with ghosts.

Mary, who had been Alice's babysitter for as long as the girl had been alive, had Alice bundled on her hip when Juniper walked over to her, leading a child by the hand. It was a little girl, brown-haired and green eyed. She looked about the same age as Alice herself.

"Mary, isn't it?" asked Juniper. "I've heard a lot about you."

Mary had met a few routewitches since her death. The power baking off of Juniper was enough to make her take an involuntary step backward, her grip on Alice tightening. "I'm not here to cause any trouble," she said. "I'm a friend of the family. You can ask Enid if you don't believe me."

Juniper shook her head. "I know who you are. You didn't come knocking on my trailer door demanding answers; I know you're here for the right reasons. I was just hoping that you could convince Alice she wanted to meet somebody."

Mary frowned. "Who?"

"My daughter, Laura." Juniper glanced to the little girl beside her. "Say hello, Laura."

"Hello," said Laura obediently. Her eyes were only for Alice.

"Alice? Sweetie, do you want to say hello to Laura?" Mary tried to shift her grip so that Alice could see the other girl. "She looks really excited to meet you."

"It's all right, Alice," said Juniper. "I was a very good friend of your mother's. We grew up together."

Now Alice uncurled, giving Juniper a suspicious look. "Like when you were little?"

"Even littler than you are now." Juniper offered her a smile. "Come play with Laura. Let me tell you about your mother. We can have a nice time, for a little while. Wouldn't you like that?"

Alice looked to Mary, half asking for reassurance and half asking for permission. Mary nodded.

"It's all right," she said, and bent to put her down. "I'll come get you when it's time for dinner. Right now, you just have some fun with your new friends."

"You won't go away before I come back?" asked Alice.

The open concern in her face made Mary's unbeatong heart ache. "I promise," said Mary. "I'll be right here for as long as you need me to be."

"Come on, Alice," said Juniper. She took Alice's hand in her free one as she straightened before walking, with a little girl on either side, toward the trailers that were arrayed on the other side of the tent.

Mary—who sometimes thought that being dead made her even worse at dealing with death—stayed
where she was, shivering, and watched them go.

Alexander found his son sitting in the kitchen, as far from the warmth and camaraderie of the tent outside as he could get without actually going back to the graveyard. He stopped in the doorway for a moment and just watching Jonathan, who was sitting at the table with his head bowed and his hands wrapped around a coffee mug.

"You may as well come in, Father," he said. "I know you're there."

"We need to talk."

"Do we?" Jonathan raised his head. "Fran is dead. I don't see what else there is to talk about."

"What you said to me before—"

"I meant every word."

Alexander shook his head. "You can't. You're the only family we have left. You'll kill your mother."

"But I'll save my child. Isn't that worth it?"

Alexander's laughter was harsh enough to make Jonathan sit up a little straighter, surprised out of his slouch. "Oh, is that what you think? That you can move away from here, and suddenly it'll be all white picket fences and normal afternoons? You'll still be a Healy, son. What you are is in your blood. You can't run away from your nature any more than the Gentling girl could turn herself human by moving to Ohio and never looking at the sea again. For better or for worse, you are what you are."

"Alice doesn't have to be," said Jonathan stiffly.

"Alice's first concern when Frannie didn't come home was that her mother had gone to shoot St. Valentine," countered Alexander. "Alice has never been happier than when she was in the care of a dead woman, or arguing theology with mice. She's a Healy, bred and born, and you're not going to change her."

Jonathan stood up so abruptly that he chair he'd been sitting in fell over backward. "I promised her!" he shouted. "I sat in front of her and I promised that Daniel would be the only child we buried, that I would never, never let this happen again!"

"And you haven't, son," said Alexander. "Alice is fine. She's healthy. She's as happy as a young girl who's just lost her mother can ever be expected to be. She needs you, and she needs her family."

"How long will that last?" Jonathan demanded. "If we stay here in Buckley, where everyone knows how to find us...how long will it last? How long before someone with an axe to grind shows up at our doorstep?"

"We've taken precautions since Daniel," said Alexander stiffly. "That won't happen again."

"So say she lives long enough to grow up. What then, Father? Do I raise her to be a monster-hunter and a scholar? Do I put the gun in her hand and tell her that I chose this life for her because I knew best?"

"I think it's the life she'd choose for herself," said Alexander. "Even if I didn't think that, I'd tell you she
gets to choose. Not you. Not some promise you made before she was even born. We need you here, Johnny. You need to be with your family. Alice needs to be with her family."

Jonathan looked at his father, tears pooling in his eyes. Finally, his shoulders sagged, and he whispered, "I don't know how to do this without her. I just...I don't know how."

Alexander crossed the space between himself and his son, and put his arms around Jonathan's shoulders, and held him close. There wasn't anything else to do.

The rest of the day passed in fits and starts: small stories, first meetings, a thousand tiny passion plays acted out over the course of an afternoon and evening. Finally, when the last respects had been paid and the last of the casseroles had been tasted, the visitors began making their last apologies and departing, either to begin their long journeys home, or to return to their rented rooms for one last night's restless sleep before they got on the road.

Laura and Alice had fallen asleep together in a corner of the big tent, the little blonde's head down on her new friend's stomach, both of them limp and boneless as only small children ever seemed to be. Juniper dozed at a nearby table, keeping a half-open eye on the two. Enid had, after some consideration, gone back inside to sleep. Let Alice have a sleepover. The poor dear had earned it.

One by one, the living slipped into the in-between dream state that was their birthright, until only the shade of Mary Dunlavy still walked. She stood near the sleeping children for a little while, watching them, and her mourning clothes unraveled, replaced by the letter jacket and jeans she'd been wearing on the night she died.

"Rest well, Alice; I love you," she said quietly, and turned, and walked away.

It was inevitable that her wandering would take her to the graveyard, where she had never been laid to rest, but so many others had. She walked to Fran's grave, kicking the fresh-dug earth with one toe, and said, "You can come out now."

"I didn't think you noticed me."

Mary smiled a little. "I've been dead a while. I notice everything."

"I guess I should have expected that," said Fran, and stepped out from behind her tombstone. She shouldn't have been able to hide herself there, but the laws of physics were different for the living and the dead, and it would have been a poor ghost who couldn't hide behind her own grave marker. "You're lookin' good."

"You're looking dead," said Mary.

Fran smiled wryly. "I suppose it comes for all of us, given time enough. I didn't look where I was goin'."

"You could stay with them."

Frances Healy—who had been called the Flower of Arizona in her time, and the Star of New Mexico—looked up sharply, a scowl on her pretty, faintly translucent face. "Don't you say that. You think I don't want to? But I wouldn't be going back for them. I'd be going back for me, and that's not fair. I had a good run. I did good work. I made a beautiful little girl, and I'm sorry I won't get to see her be a woman,
but she'll be all right without me. You'll see. She'll be just fine."

"You could say goodbye."

"No, I couldn't." Fran shook her head. "I go back to say goodbye, and then I think ‘it'll be easier if I stay a few days.’ Only it doesn't get easier, and then it's the summer, and then it's the holidays, and then I'm haunting my family, and they're never getting the chance to let me go. It's better this way."

"I suppose that's true," said Mary reluctantly. "You want me to show you where to go from here?"

Fran shook her head. "I think I know the way. I bet Rabbit's waiting for me. I always loved that horse. You look out for my family, you hear? Make sure they're taken care of."

"I will," said Mary solemnly.

Fran smiled at her, tipped an imaginary hat, and was gone, leaving the ghost of Mary Dunlavy—who was haunting no one but herself—standing alone in the graveyard. She looked at the space where Fran had been for a while. Then she wiped her spectral tears away, and turned to walk back to the Healy house. Alice would be waking up soon enough, and she would want her favorite babysitter when she did.

It had taken nearly two weeks to arrange the funeral of Frances Healy.

For the ones she'd left behind, it would take a lifetime to say goodbye.