

THE  
MIDNIGHT  
ROOM

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# THE MIDNIGHT ROOM

A CONTEMPORARY PARANORMAL ROMANCE SHORT  
STORY

ZOEY DRAVEN



# THE MIDNIGHT ROOM FULLY IMMERSIVE AUDIOBOOK

After being possessed by a demon in an Edinburgh graveyard on Samhuinn, Mallory Bell seeks the help of a mysterious and handsome stranger...who might be just as dangerous as the thing that haunts her.

*This short story has a fully immersive audiobook companion, which includes a multicast of talented narrators, original music, and sound effects. Scan the QR code to listen as you read:*



# AUDIOBOOK CAST

**Marcio Catalano** as Alastair Graham

**Stephanie Nemeth Parker** as Mallory Bell

**Jenna Sharpe** as Lottie

**Gary Furlong** as Clyde

**Christopher Tester** as Bennett



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# THE MIDNIGHT ROOM

“Love.”

There was a familiar heaviness in my bones, keeping me rooted to the damp ground, stuck to the earth like the crumbling rocks around me. No, not rocks. *Graves*.

There was an older man hovering above me in a crouch, his bundled frame outlined against the gray of the early morning.

“You all right, love?” the man asked, his voice tinged in quiet concern yet calm, as if he didn’t want to alarm me. He had gray eyes, gray hairs in his heavy eyebrows, gray stubble on his chin. When I turned my head, I saw the tipped point of a familiar gray obelisk. Gray, gray, gray. The bright green grass seemed phosphorescent contrasted with all the gray.

Though I knew, I still croaked out, “Where am I?”

His hand hovered in the air carefully when I sat up. I winced at the stiffness of my back and the cold ache in my hips. There was a black slug on the back of my hand, and I shook it off quickly, my stomach roiling when I saw the sticky clear substance it left behind. My jeans and hair were damp from the drizzle, but I was wearing my two-sizes-too-big waxed jacket I’d found in a charity shop last summer.

“Old Calton,” the man replied, unwinding the scarf around his neck. Before I

could protest, he wound it around mine, still warm from his skin. It smelled of woody cigar smoke and cinnamon. White cat—or dog—hairs were clinging to the frayed ends. “There you go. You know it?”

“Yes,” I murmured, pushing up to a stand. I heard the man’s knees crackle when he rose with me.

“You sure you’re all right? Can I phone someone for you?” he asked, already patting down his jacket pocket, pulling out an old blue flip phone. “A friend?”

“No, I don’t live far.”

“Were you here all night?” he asked, frowning, scanning the area where he’d found me, as if it would present him with clues.

Last night...I could recall leaving Jenny’s flat and walking through the Meadows toward Old Town, pleasantly buzzed from the cheap Tesco mulled wine and full off Camembert cheese and the rosemary bread we’d baked. But how had I ended up near Calton Hill?

“The gates are still closed to the public... How did you even get in here?”

“How did *you*?” I couldn’t help but return, my teeth beginning to chatter as panic and fear and familiar dread swarmed me.

“Who do you think opens the gates in the morning?” he asked, giving me a small smile that told me he wasn’t offended by my snap. “The first minister?”

“I’m sorry...I...I—”

“None of that,” he said, waving off my apology. “Let me find you a taxi so you can get home, all right?”

I reached up to push back a damp tendril of hair, tucking it behind my ear. “Thank you...”

“Clyde,” he replied, then I saw the moment his eyes strayed to my wrist when my jacket sleeve fell. His gray gaze narrowed, frown deepening briefly, before his shoulders tensed. His voice went quieter. “Where’d you get that, love?”

The question was careful. I peered down at my wrist. At the blackened veins that resembled tree roots, crawling up my flesh.

“Tattoo,” I rasped, my stomach in knots at the sight of it. “I’ll get a taxi at Waverley station. Thanks for your help, Clyde.”

My legs were shaking and unsteady as I fled. At the entrance of the Old Calton Burial Ground, I looked over my shoulder. Clyde was peering down at the



grave I'd woken beside, and for a brief moment, I hesitated. Did he know something? Could he help me?

His head turned, and our gazes clashed. No, if he *could* that meant this was *real*. I got spooked and scurried down the steps out onto the street.

At Waverley station, I went to the taxi line and hopped into the first one available, my wet jeans squeaking against the black vinyl seat.

"Lauriston Gardens, please."

"You all right?" the driver asked, peering at me in the rearview. Likely trying to assess if I could pay the fare.

I closed my eyes, raising a trembling hand to rake back my hair. I wished everyone would stop asking me that.

"Wait!" I heard the muted shout.

Clyde came jogging up to the taxi, and he opened up the door before I could tell the driver to leave. I shrank back into the seat. His chest was heaving as he caught his own breath.

"Alastair," he gasped out.

"What?" I asked, shaking my head, feeling my throat tighten as tears threatened to spill in my eyes. I just wanted to go home. I wanted to take a bath, climb into bed, and sleep away this frustration and fear and fatigue. I wanted to pretend I hadn't woken up in a graveyard. *Again*. "I don't—"

"Alastair Graham. Find him at the Midnight Room in the Cowgate. He's there most nights."

He tilted his chin toward my covered wrist.

"He can help you with *that*. Before it gets worse."

Then he was gone.



Wrinkling my nose, I quickly scurried past a drunk, pissing man who was swaying and humming, his back to me in a close. I'd been living in Edinburgh for almost three years, and I didn't think I'd ever get used to the sheer amount of men I'd seen relieving themselves in darkened alleyways. Or the cigarette smoke.

Or the maddening beauty of this labyrinth of a city...and soon I would leave it behind, my visa ending in a few months. Though maybe it was for the best, all things considered.

It was a weeknight at the end of November, and a sharp chill bit into my thick tights. I hitched the strap of my canvas tote bag over my shoulder when it drooped, sniffing. I felt like I was getting sick, a headache booming behind my left eye and a sore throat from sleeping in the graveyard through the frigid night.

Ever since Halloween night, I'd felt sick.

There was a bouncer—tall and burly with a neck the size of my thigh—outside, and I fished out my ID when I stepped up to the door.

“Is, um, Alastair in tonight?”

The bouncer squinted down at my ID, and then his eyes slowly rose to mine at the question. “What do you want with Alastair, Mallory Bell from San Francisco?”

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, and I swore the black veins circling my wrist began to burn.

“I was told to find him here,” I answered.

“By who?”

“A man named Clyde.”

The bouncer didn't react to the name. A moment of silence passed between us, and I heard a group of university students laughing drunkenly as they passed, a girl shrieking at her friend who'd stolen her phone and was reading her texts out loud.

“Piss off!” she shouted, laughing.

The bouncer handed me my ID and jerked his head toward the door, painted black and peeling around the gold handle. “It's a quiet night. You'll find him in one of the back booths.”

“Thank you.”

I pulled open the door and stepped inside. I was greeted by a set of gold elevators and stairs heading down beside them. I opted for the stairs, my black boots clacking on the stone.

Downstairs, the Midnight Room was surprisingly opulent. The bar stretched against the entire right side of the large underground lounge, glittering bottles

displayed in a glass case lit by golden lights. The bar was polished black, inlaid with hammered-gold geometric patterns. There was only one bartender behind it, and he was shaking up a drink for a woman standing there before pouring it into a stemmed crystal glass.

Opposite the bar there were standing high tables, each lit with a flickering candle. The dark hardwood floor wasn't sticky as I took my first tentative steps inside, catching the bartender's quizzical eye as I walked past. The back part of the lounge was darker, primarily lit by tall tapered candles in the brass candelabras mounted into the exposed stone walls.

The seating area seemed private and quiet, tucked away from the main bar. I saw a few couples littered around the cognac leather booths. One larger group of men in button-down shirts and dark slacks were drinking pints at the table closest to a black gas fireplace, flames flickering inside, melted white wax from the candles dripping down the sides of the mantle. They flirted with the pretty girl that came around to tidy up their empty glasses.

I felt the *burn* of eyes on me before I finally located the lone man in the far booth. His face was lit by the golden glow of the candle at his table, black eyes like consuming shadow, and I nearly shivered where I stood. He had dark, wavy blond hair that fell just above the tops of his shoulders. It was parted off center, one lock resting against his smooth, pale forehead.

He was nursing a glass tumbler of amber liquid, the table littered with papers around him.

With bated breath, I watched as he slid from the booth, all feline, predatory grace. He was tall, his build lithe but strong. He had a long torso and broad shoulders. The sleeves of his black button-down were rolled up his forearms, revealing ropelike muscles and prominent veins as he approached.

*Run*, came the stray, panicked thought. I was struck by a sense of wrongness. And I didn't know why, but I had the oddest feeling that this man wasn't...wasn't *right*. He was otherworldly, possibly no better than the thing that haunted me.

Alastair Graham—as I could only assume this man was—cocked his head to the side as he regarded me. His sculpted chin and jaw tilted upward slightly as he stared, his hooded eyes roving around my face, my hair, my body. Even, oddly, to the side of me, his eyes fastening on something over my shoulder.

A buzzing started over my skin, *underneath* my skin, making me scratch at the veins winding their way around my wrist. When my tongue didn't feel like lead in my mouth, I croaked, "Alastair Graham?"

He inclined his head. "And who might you be?"

I started with brief surprise. "You're...you're American too?"

His smile seemed mocking. "No, love."

"But your accent—"

"I have lived in many places. Accents are changeable. I take on whichever one I need to to suit me."

"Isn't that like lying?" I couldn't help but ask.

"I lived in New York for longer than you've been alive, my love," he rasped. "Is that lying?"

"You don't seem *that* much older than me," I replied, but *that* was my own lie. In the glowing candlelight, he looked to be in his early thirties. But his eyes seemed endlessly ancient. I'd heard fairy stories all my life from my grandmother—of immortal and frightening creatures. But did I actually believe them?

A few weeks ago, I would have said no.

He said nothing, merely waited for an answer I'd never given.

I cleared my throat, remembering why I was here. "I'm Mallory. Mallory Bell. I—I've been..."

I laughed when I trailed off, thinking the words silently that made me want to cry.

"And why have you come to me, Mallory Bell?"

"It sounds crazy, every time I try to say the words out loud," I confessed.

"Try," Alastair urged, crossing his arms over his chest, staring down at me hard, his eyes never moving from mine.

"I think...I think I've been possessed," I whispered, my shoulders tensed, waiting for his reaction. He didn't even blink. "A man named Clyde...I met him this morning when I woke up in the cemetery. Old Calton. He told me you could help me before *this*, whatever this is, got worse."

I waited. And waited. My heart was thundering in my chest, and when it finally began to slow and Alastair *still* said nothing, I began to think I'd been played for a fool.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" I asked, a cold bite in my tone that hadn't

been there before. Anger rose, bright and familiar. Even the candles seem to flicker with it. “Or is this all some sick joke? Fake, just like your accent?”

He grabbed my arm. I jolted, the breath squeezing from my lungs, and it was like getting drenched in icy water, the hot rage dying pitifully with it. His touch was warm, but it felt...stable. Strong and sure.

“That’s quite a nasty shade that’s attached itself to you, Mallory Bell,” he said softly.

“A what?” I whispered, eyes wide.

“A shade,” he repeated, his tone hardened, his smile dying. The expression on his face...for the first time, I actually believed he could help me. There was knowing there. There was an *answer*. Suddenly it felt like he was an anchor when I’d been drifting helplessly in a deadly current, pulling me in a direction I was desperate not to go.

When his hand fell away, I shivered and asked, “Is that like a ghost? Or a—a demon?”

Alastair stepped to the side, gesturing for me to join him, and I dropped down into the round booth like a heavy stone. The leather creaked when Alastair took his place next to me, lifting up his whisky and taking a slow sip as he regarded me over the glass rim.

My hands were shaking, and when he replaced the glass on the table, I reached for it. His brow rose as he watched me drain the contents in one gulp. He said nothing, only made eye contact with the woman still standing with the group of men by the fireplace and raised two fingers. She nodded, made her excuse to flutter away, heading toward the bar with the tray of empty pints.

“Sorry,” I murmured, wiping my lips with the back of my hand, feeling the whisky *burn*. It felt good, the only thing that had made me feel warm all month.

“I own a bar—a glass of whisky will hardly set me back,” Alastair replied. “Even if it was a sixty-two-year-old Macallan that you just downed like a £1 shot of tequila.”

My cheeks felt flushed, but if it was from whisky or his shadowed eyes, I couldn’t tell.

“No, I meant about when I snapped at you and your—”

“Fake accent,” he supplied, his lips quirking. He leaned forward, his sinewy forearms pressing into the loose papers across the table. My skin was buzzing

again, distracting, maddening. “I heard. Luckily for you, in my line of work, I’m used to quick tempers.”

“Owning bars?”

“My other work,” he corrected, his eyes tracing the outline of me again. I wondered what it was he saw.

“What’s a shade?” I asked.

“*Not* like a ghost,” he replied, answering my prior question. “They’re a little worse. More like a demon of the underworld, those who live in constant shadow. They feed on fear and pain. And the longer you allow them to burrow into your soul, the harder it is to get rid of them. Like I mentioned, yours is powerful.”

“Please don’t call it mine. I won’t think like that. I refuse.”

The woman swung by our table and dropped off two glasses of whisky, a square ice cube spinning in the amber liquid of the tumbler. She left wordlessly, and Alastair held his palm out toward me.

He tugged up the sleeve of my jacket and the cardigan sweater I had underneath. His thumb brushed over the black veins, and I shivered.

“It’s staked its claim,” he told me. “Do you know where it found you? And when?”

His touch stopped the buzzing under my skin, and for a bright moment of relief, I wanted to crawl closer and wrap him around me. Maybe if I did, I could feel normal again. Not so tired. Not so angry. I wouldn’t wake up in cemeteries or with random bruises trailing along my flesh. My hair would stop falling out. My skin wouldn’t look so dull and ashen.

I knew exactly when it had happened.

“On Halloween,” I told him. “I went to the Samhuinn Fire Festival that night with friends. That’s all I remember. When I woke up the next morning, I was alone at Old Calton, beside a grave.”

“Which one?”

I swallowed. “Callum and Elizabeth Bell’s grave.”

Alastair’s thumb moved over the veins. “Distant relation, I presume?”

I nodded.

“And what do you know of them? Their story? The name sounds familiar. I’m trying to place why.”

“They...*he* was a terrible man, from what I’ve researched. The black sheep of

the family,” I confessed, the joke falling flat, my lips pressing together. I’d been horrified by the tale, understanding why my grandmother had kept that shameful family secret buried. “His worst crime was that he murdered at least eight women and three men. Grave robbery, burglary too.”

My stomach turned.

“He was sentenced to hang. But before he did, he escaped his cell. He was found with Elizabeth, both dead, in their flat in Old Town.”

I shook loose of his grip and tugged the tumbler close, lifting it to my lips and taking a healthy swallow.

“Maybe...maybe it runs in my blood,” I whispered, my deepest fear. “Maybe I’m not possessed—maybe I’m just going crazy and I’m desperate to believe it’s something else. Maybe *he* had this anger too. Maybe it made him do terrible, unspeakable things.”

“I think it’s safe to assume that a shade *has* latched itself onto you,” Alastair finally said. “And that it’s very likely the shade of your own ancestor. I’ve seen it happen before. Blood calls to blood. It makes a possession all the easier.”

Hope sprang in my chest, momentarily stealing my breath. “And you were able to help those people?”

“Most, yes,” Alastair replied, his lips pressing together. His eyes were shadowed, the glow of the candle flickering across his face. “But everything has a price.”

“And what’s yours?” I asked, afraid. “I—I don’t have much money.”

“I don’t want money,” he told me. He leaned forward. His voice dropped, sultry. Quiet. I found myself holding my breath as he said, “When you’ve lived as long as I have, you have more than enough.”

I froze.

The glittering flash of his crystal tumbler sparkled when he raised it between us, when he took a small sip. “I don’t value money, Mallory Bell. I value *time*.”

“I...don’t understand.”

“I want time. To rid you of your shade, I’ll require seven years. Willingly given.”

Confusion and a small bite of horror nipped in my chest. “Like...being your servant?”

Alastair laughed, the sound musical and oddly beautiful. But my feet were

beginning to tingle, my legs going restless. My body was telling me to run, those animal instincts loud even in the face of an answer, a solution.

“No, my love,” he murmured when his laugh faded. “Nothing like that. Seven years taken from you, shaved off the end of your life, and given to me. That is my price.”

The lounge swayed.

“What...” I trailed off, breathless. My gaze fastened back on him, my fingers curling into a fist on the table. “What are you? Are you even human?”

Did I even believe him? He could be crazy.

So why wasn't I leaving?

He snatched up my arm and pushed up the sleeve on my jacket. There, in the dim lighting, I saw the black veins moving underneath my skin, as if recoiling at his touch. Pain seared me, bright and hot, and I bit my lip to keep from crying out, a low hiss escaping me instead.

But he didn't stop at the veins—he exposed the black bruises on my arms, like an invisible grip had held me too tightly.

“Do you think whatever did this is human too?” he asked.

“I don't know what to believe.”

“What does *this* is an evil form. Soon you will begin losing days. You will wake up in even stranger places than graveyards. It will take control of you, and the more you allow it to happen, the easier it becomes. You are an *escape* for the shade. An escape from literal hell. A chance to live again. If you think it won't take advantage, then you're a fool. He was a murderer, you claim. What will you do when you wake up next to a dead body, covered in their blood, with no memory or recollection of how it happened? You think a shade's proclivities end in death?”

He released me, and I gasped in a lungful of air. Horror had drained the blood from my face. I felt welded to the booth seat, unmovable.

“No,” he said, leaning back in his chair, regarding me over the table. His black eyes seemed endless in the darkness. “I am not human. But I am better than the soulless demon that does that,” he finished, waving his hand toward *all* of me. “Does that comfort you?”

“I don't know,” I choked out, sinking back into the booth, going limp. “A month ago I wouldn't still be sitting here, listening to this.”



“I would advise you not to think too long about my offer,” Alastair said, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a...

“You have a business card for this part of your work?” I asked, almost laughing, even though my eyes filled with tears, blurring my vision as I took it from him. “What does it say? For the low, low price of precious years, you get the exorcism of your lifetime?”

But even I heard what went unspoken between us. That seven years taken from me might be well worth it if it meant getting my *entire* life back. It was a small price to pay...if it worked.

“That teaches me to go into graveyards,” I murmured quietly, looking down at the velvety black business card. Thick and heavy, it only displayed his name and his phone number, foiled in silver. On the back, there was a family crest. At the very center lay two crossed daggers. “Especially on Samhuinn.”

I stood from the booth.

“Thanks for the expensive whisky,” I said. “Sorry for downing it like a tequila shot. But I’ve had a hard month.”

Alastair’s brows lowered, his head tilting to the side as he regarded me. There was an odd look on his face.

“Have we met before?” he asked suddenly.

“No,” I said, giving him a half smile. “I would’ve remembered someone like you. You’re a little unforgettable, and you don’t meet many people like that in a lifetime.”

With that, I turned to leave, tugging down my jacket sleeve. The bartender nodded at me as I left, and I took the lift to the floor above, not trusting that my legs wouldn’t give out on me if I took the stairs.

I felt heavy. So fucking heavy. And when I stepped through the doors of the Midnight Room, when the crisp air hit my hot face...I realized I felt *warm*. For the first time in a month, I wasn’t cold.

The bouncer snuffed out his cigarette on the wall and then asked, “You find him?”

I rubbed my thumb over the velvety card in my hand, and just like the man whose name was printed on it, it felt like an anchor. It felt real.

I nodded, murmuring my thanks, then rounded the corner. Pausing, I tilted my head back to look up at the dark sky.

“Dammit,” I breathed.

Stopping under a lamppost, I pulled out my phone and squinted down at the silver foiled letters, tapping them in with a trembling finger.

I felt strangely calm as I listened to it ring.

“Yes?” came the deep voice on the other end.

“I’ll do it,” I said. I wasn’t even sure what *it* even was.

There was a pause on the other end, and I held my breath.

Then Alastair Graham said, “Meet me here tomorrow. Midnight.”

“Midnight,” I whispered.

“Mallory?” Alastair murmured, before I hung up. “I’ll take care of you. You don’t have to be afraid anymore.”

My shoulders lowered, and I closed my eyes. A sob escaped me before I could hide it. Tears tracked down my cheeks. Even though I felt my muscles spasm painfully down my back as my jaw locked up and as a cold, icy sensation gripped me tight, I repeated those words in my head like a prayer, over and over again.

I thought those beautiful words alone were well worth seven years.

## Alastair

“I don’t get out of bed for less than ten years, Alastair,” Charlotte said, stifling a yawn.

“I’m giving you all seven years, Lottie,” I informed her. “One night’s work—not even. I’ll be in and out, all quick like.”

She regarded me carefully, her hand hovering over a wickedly sharp knife I was certain she’d once used to cut off a man’s middle finger. A man who’d stolen one of her talismans and tried to replicate one of her spells with disastrous consequences. He’d been dead when she’d cut off the finger.

Now she picked it up and began to skin an apple, the peel bright red, and the scent reminded me of the orchards in Normandy in October.

“Why are you doing this?” she wondered, one long string of apple peel beginning to lower closer and closer to the ground like a rope. “Who is this girl?”

“She’s lost,” I told Lottie, nodding my head toward her, “just like when I found you.”

My friend snorted. “A charity case, then. Who knew you had such a big bleeding heart, Alastair? Maybe you’ve gone soft in your old age.”

“Will you help, or not?” I asked, my patience thinning. Whatever was bubbling on the AGA was making my nose itch. I could *smell* the power of her magic, and it made me restless.

Lottie sighed. “Fine. But I’m not giving away a single year to you.”

“How about a single day, then?”

The apple peel fell to the ground. “Don’t tell me you’re getting sentimental. You want something to remember her by?”

“Midnight tonight,” I grunted, getting annoyed by her poking.

“Yeah, yeah,” Lottie grumbled, and I tugged open the front door, letting in a whoosh of fresh air. “You’ve always had a thing for damsels in distress. Don’t let this one blind you.”

I paused at the threshold.

“We’ve helped a lot of people, you and me and Bennett,” I said quietly. “I’m actually tired of helping people because I know it will never be enough. Isn’t that fucked up?”

“So why are you helping this girl?”

“Do you remember Elizabeth Bell?” I asked.

Lottie frowned. “Who? No.”

“I do.” I couldn’t remember Elizabeth’s face, but I remembered the cold wash of guilt and loathing when I’d visited her grave. The realization of why her name had sounded familiar hit me last night, in my dreams, in my memories.

Shaking my head, I stepped out into Fleshmarket Close. The dark alley was empty, though I saw a tourist taking pictures of it from Cockburn Street, the lens of his DSLR flashing in the light.

“I’ll see you tonight.”



“Those will kill you, you know,” came the soft voice. Mallory Bell stood just

beyond the light of the red neon sign, installed onto the exterior wall of the bar that owned it, which read *Not all those who wander are lost*.

Through the swirling gray smoke, I watched Mallory step closer, and I grinned when I flicked the cigarette down, crushing the glowing tip under the sole of my boot.

“They haven’t yet,” I muttered. A perk of my curse—or gift, depending on one’s outlook—I supposed.

My grin died when I caught a black shadow curling around her shoulder, wispy like fog. I caught her subtle flinch and observed as she rubbed at the burning touch I knew she could feel but could not see.

It was rare that I could see a shade in this realm. If I could, it was a powerful demon, and given how quickly it had latched itself onto Mallory, I knew it was hungry and desperate. *Aching*.

I wondered if she knew the origin of her name meant *unfortunate*. Or *unlucky*. She was both to carry such a weight.

“I only smoke before an exorcism, as you call it,” I said, placing my hand on the small of her back, taking her cold bare palm in my other. I grit my teeth at the searing throb that reverberated in my bones, the chilling screech that only I could hear, threatening to burst my eardrums. But slowly, the shadowy black tendrils disappeared, the shade shrinking away from this realm, giving Mallory a brief reprieve.

I saw the luminous relief on her face, even as she looked up at me expectantly. I hadn’t heard her question beyond the shade’s screeching.

“Sorry?” I asked, pulling open the doors to the Midnight Room.

“Is that what this is—an exorcism? Will it hurt?” she asked. Oddly, there was no fear in her voice. Only acceptance. *Strange*. I’d witnessed grown men piss their trousers before this ritual. I could fill all the liquor bottles in my possession with frightened tears over the long years I’d been doing this.

Mallory Bell was calm, as if asking for the time.

“I can’t say it won’t hurt,” I told her, feeling her squeeze my hand. “But it’s more like a battle than an exorcism. On our end. Not yours. Not many even remember it.”

“Our?” she repeated questioningly. In the lift, I pressed the gold button for

the lounge level. A moment later, we walked into my—nearly—deserted bar. Lottie was drinking a brightly colored mai tai from one of my crystal tumblers.

“Our,” I repeated, gesturing to the grumpy witch who’d insisted I keep a healthy stock of those tacky paper umbrellas just for her fruity drinks.

“And this must be the charity case,” I heard Lottie mumble right before she sucked down the rest of her drink, slurping loudly.

Mallory frowned, pausing. “Excuse me?”

“Charlotte. Hiya. Pleased to meet you,” Lottie said, saluting the confused woman with two fingers. “I’ll be watching over you while Alastair here goes to take care of your presumptuous hitchhiking beasty.”



“All ready down there,” came the booming voice from the back lounge. Bennett appeared, wiping his hands on his trousers. “Found a few dead mice, but it’s just as we left it last.”

“Did you at least save their little bones for me?” Lottie asked, annoyed.

“Forgot,” he grunted.

“This is Bennett,” I informed Mallory. “You might have seen him last night.”

“Mallory Bell from San Francisco,” he greeted, nodding at her.

She gave him a small smile and returned, “Bennett the Bouncer.”

His booming laugh made Lottie jump. “You’ll do fine down there. Luckily for you, Alastair has a great talent for shade hunting.”

“Shade hunting?” Mallory questioned as I guided her past the two of them. “When you said a battle, you really meant it, didn’t you?” She laughed in disbelief. “Is this even real?”

I pushed open the back lounge door and then guided her to the storage room where we kept extra kegs. Crouching down, I snagged the brass hook of what appeared to be a cellar hatch, flinging it open.

“Down there?” she asked, and I sensed her sudden nerves.

“You’ll need to trust me tonight,” I said quietly, cupping her cheek in my

palm, forcing her to meet my eyes. Her brilliant green eyes felt searing. “That’s it—look at me. This is all about trust, you understand?”

She breathed deep, her eyes never leaving mine.

“Yeah?” I asked, and she nodded. “Let’s get rid of this thing, all right? Then you can have your life back.”

When she nodded again, I released her, descending first down the steep stairs into the underground, using my phone as a light more for her benefit than mine.

A moment later...she joined me.

It was quiet and hushed down in the vaults. The air was cool and damp, and voices could echo for miles. “These vaults have always given me the creeps.”

“They should,” Lottie said when she joined us down below, followed by Bennett. Her voice was wistful as she added, “So many lost down here.”

I led the way. The vaults were made up of short tunnels leading to larger rooms, all made of stone. A vast underground network right below Edinburgh, once used as taverns, smelters, cobblers, brothels. Or a place for criminals to hide.

“Here,” I said, leading Mallory into the small room. I’d had a heavy door installed and had an entire coven place a protection spell on it, much to Lottie’s annoyance. Bennett would wait outside. He would only open the door once he was sure I was...not compromised.

“Is that a pentagram?” Mallory asked, just as Bennett bolted the door, locking the three of us inside.

“A confinement spell,” Lottie said, and I could almost hear her eye roll. “Really. The lack of education these days about the finer arts. Lay down at the center, little Bell. Let us ring you.”

“Lottie,” I warned quietly, crouching down over the section of loose stones along the back wall of the room. Fitting my fingers into small ridges, I pulled up the largest slab and then the one next to it. Underneath, tucked away and protected, lay a chest. I slid open the lid and took out my two daggers.

The old, blackened leather wrapped around the hilts was so unyielding from my grip over centuries. It felt like obsidian, cool to the touch and smooth. The runes etched into the blades were almost as old as I was, carved by the light of a full moon on the eve of my mortal death.

The best thing about these blades? Despite their ability to kill a soulless shade?

The sight of them shut up Lottie's snide comments completely. Because she respected them. She respected my sacrifice to wield them.

When I rose, Lottie began to whisper, reciting a spell she'd created, in a language she'd crafted to prevent others from stealing it. Words had power. Only one who understood the meaning of the words could channel the magic of them.

She was clever, my Lottie. It was why I put up with her over the many decades we'd been friends.

"What are those?" Mallory asked, breath quick. Lottie made her lie down on the stone floor, her dark hair fanned out around her head like a halo. In the candlelight Bennett had prepared for us, I saw her pain. The first tendrils of Lottie's magic were beginning to make the shade restless.

*Brave girl*, I thought.

"Blackbane daggers," I told her, keeping my voice low as I waited for the portal to appear. "Does it impress you to know these are the only two in existence?"

"It might if I had any idea what blackbane daggers were."

I smiled, crouching down next to her as the thin air in the vault began to crackle, Lottie's voice hushed in the background.

As I looked down at Mallory, pale and shivering, gritting her teeth in her too-big jacket, I was overcome by a *fierce* need to protect her. It felt familiar. Achingly so. It was why I'd sacrificed as much as I had, hadn't I? To protect a woman, long ago. A woman long dead because she had rejected the very thing I'd become for her. She'd called *me* a demon on her deathbed, and I'd watched her die, wishing I could join her in my grief.

But Mallory was looking up at me like she *believed* I would save her. For the first time, perhaps she believed that.

I brushed my thumb across her cheek, finding it wet with tears. From pain, though, not fear. Because she had faith?

"They are daggers soaked in a dying mortal's blood, fed and powered with the last of his life. Under a bright winter moon. A warrior's life willingly given, to protect his people against evils of other realms when the barriers wear too thin."

The moisture in the air was heating up, drying up. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the portal to the shadow realm begin to crack and split. Lottie's voice never rose—it was a steady, certain thing. But I could feel her magic crawling over

my flesh, and I grit my teeth against it. The candles were beginning to glow brighter, small little stars in that dark place.

“How did you get them, then?”

“It was my blood,” I informed her, turning the blade so she could see the metal. “These runes are my oath.”

Her eyes widened, but then they snapped directly above her. A fissure had formed overhead, the vault humming with energy as the space seemed to stretch and distort around itself. The emptiness was warping and twisting. *Opening.*

“Remember...you don’t have to fear,” I said, my eyes on the mortal woman who was trusting me with her life.



The shadow realm wasn’t hellfire and brimstone. It was dark and quiet, a hell of the shade’s own making. There was no breeze. There was no warmth. There was no light.

The blackness felt like sludge as I waded through the endless fog, waiting, searching. The shade was here...

And when it struck, like a hidden viper, it did so quickly and relentlessly with a weapon it conjured from the power of this realm. A weapon that took different shapes, twisting and turning to strike its target true.

I dodged, and a series of dark spikes narrowly missed embedding themselves down my chest. Could I die in this realm? Not technically. But if I was weak enough, the shade *could* hold me here. I’d be imprisoned here, living out my collected years in this hell.

Like a vortex was consuming the fog, it began to disappear, and a twisting figure took its place before me, made up of shadowy tendrils and black sludge. It had no face, no limbs, no eyes. It was a wiggling mass like it was covered in millions of maggots, but it moved and swayed like a murmuration of starlings at dusk.

“Quickly, Alastair,” came Lottie’s echoing voice, coming from the direction of the portal veil. “It’s strong! Stronger than we thought!”



*Fuck.* Lottie possessed the most powerful portal magic I'd ever witnessed, but this shade's realm might be too much for even her.

It was then I realized an obvious truth. This *was* wrong. It felt wrong.

"You're not Callum Bell, are you?"

The allusive memory became bright and clear—the one I'd been chasing in my dream last night. Elizabeth Bell had come to us, even under the threat of being associated with witchcraft, even under the threat of being hanged.

*He's changed,* she'd told me, tears in her eyes, desperation pouring off her in waves. *I'm scared for him.*

Not scared of him. Scared *for* him.

The shade struck forward, two conjured limbs as thick as tree trunks hurtling toward me. I dodged under both, turning and striking quick with one dagger, hearing its hiss when I cut off the wiggling mass of one. It plopped to the ground, the sound wet and sickening, but I watched the shade regenerate the cut flesh.

"Not Callum Bell at all," I said with gritted teeth.

This was the shade that had possessed him. How many other victims had there been? Mallory Bell was stronger than I'd given her credit for. To withstand *this* for as long as she had...

Whatever this was, its power was too great to have been created in the last two centuries. This was an ancient thing. Evil itself in a tangible, ever-changing form, left to rot here over lifetimes.

"And still," I said, rising, "I've ended more terrible things than you."

The shade's form convulsed, and it let out a dark, ugly, wet snarl. When it rushed at me this time, it formed claws, swiping through the thick air with surprising precision. My dagger whistled, the runes on the blade beginning to glow in the darkness. They'd once soaked up moonlight as I'd died, and the shade shrieked at the sudden light, recoiling from it, the tendrils that made up its claws sizzling away.

I lunged toward it, my eyes seeking out the shade's heart, waiting for an opening. It blocked my daggers' blows, throwing up a wall that resembled a shield, but then it shrunk back when the runes shone brighter, hissing.

Anger and hatred and sorrow assaulted me. The shade was casting the emotions at me like a spell, trying to sway my hand when I struck forward again. But I grit my teeth, shaking my head to clear my mind, wiping the emotions away

like I would a sticky cobweb from my path. Though they lingered, they were lessened.

That was when I saw it. My next strike made the shade twist, and in the folds of its dark body, I saw a small, tangled mass at its very center, exposed by the glowing rune light.

I grunted when the shade hurtled itself behind me, so quick it looked like it was teleporting, leaving ribbons of shadow in its wake. It speared me from behind with a clawed limb, and my flesh burned like it'd been branded. I cried out, nearly dropping to my knees at the excruciating pain. The burn felt like the shade was peeling my flesh from my back, strip by strip.

I twisted away from it, dragging in deep lungfuls of air. Rage came—my own this time. The pain helped me focus as movement slowed around me.

Thrice, I struck my daggers' blades together, the reverberation of them a calming hum though I felt my strength surge.

Thrice, I struck them together again, and light flooded the realm.

The shade roared an unearthly sound, quaking the very ground, and I sprinted at it, my eyes homing in on its heart, wiggling and alive. The desperate shade tried to escape, but the first slide of my dagger held it pinned in place. I heard Mallory scream through Lottie's portal.

My second blade pierced the tangled heart perfectly.

I twisted the dagger.

And then...the realm went blissfully quiet, save for my own panting breaths and the thunderous beat of my own heart in my chest.

The shade disintegrated into ash.

Before the black snow touched the ground...it was gone. Like it had never been.

### *One month later...*

Sitting in my booth at the Midnight Room was a woman with dark hair and luminous green eyes, the color of which I now associated with the lush greens of the Highlands in spring. She had a tumbler of whisky, one painted fingernail

tapping on the side of the thick crystal. Next to it was a shot glass filled with what I assumed was tequila.

“You’re late,” she chided though she tried to hide her pleased smile, her eyes holding mine as I slid into the booth next to her.

Leaning over, I pressed a kiss to her temple, my lips lingering. She smelled like citrus soap, and I resisted the urge to bury my face in her hair.

“Lottie’s client turned out to be a peculiar case,” I told her. “Apologies, my love. Is this for me?”

Her hand went to my thigh when I brought the whisky to my lips. Her touch rivaled the smoky burn that trailed a path of fire to my belly.

“How many years are you asking for from Lottie’s client?” she questioned.

I paused, hearing a strange note in her tone. Pondering her question, I replaced the tumbler and slung my arm over the back of the booth, pulling her closer.

“I didn’t ask for any.”

“You never asked for mine either,” she reminded me quietly.

“I offered them to Lottie for her help,” I confessed. “But after that night and”—I gave her a quirked smile—“after us...Lottie decided on benevolence. Her word, not mine.”

“Or charity,” Mallory grumbled, though I caught her relieved smile. A dull pang of guilt hit me. I should’ve told her sooner—I hadn’t realized it had been weighing on her. “Now she can hold it against me.”

“That she can. Which will be payment enough for her,” I said. “Your years are yours. Spend them however you wish. Perhaps...even here in Edinburgh.”

“I would like that. For now,” she said quietly, flashing me a long look. “So what do I owe *you*?”

I scoffed.

“You saved my life, Alastair,” she told me, sliding closer, her warm hand trailing up my arm, and I barely suppressed a shiver. “What do I owe you?”

Everything in my life was temporary. These would be fleeting moments of warmth and pinpricks of happiness with her...and I would savor her smiles while I could. One day, I might stand over her grave. One day, I might barely remember her.

The years I had ahead of me had begun to seem endless, a desperate ache that

had been wearing on me for quite some time. I'd begun to imagine letting my collected years just...run out. I'd given enough, hadn't I? I'd upheld my oath.

Maybe I could let my years run out with her...

My thumb brushed over her bare shoulder. The fire was burning in the hearth, a green wreath decorated with red-and-gold ornaments draped over the mantle. The back lounge was empty. I had been very late tonight, and yet...she'd waited for me.

"A kiss," I replied.

I barely caught her grin before she was leaning closer. Her lips were soft and warm. She tasted of rosemary and whisky. When her tongue swept in, I groaned, my throat tingling at her sweetness.

"Deal," Mallory Bell whispered.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoey Draven is an Amazon Top 50 and USA Today bestselling author, who loves writing Happily Ever Afters with an otherworldly twist. She is the author of spicy Science Fiction and Fantasy Romance books, such as the *Horde Kings of Dakkar* and *Brides of the Kylorr* series. When she's not writing she's probably drinking one too many cups of coffee, hiking in the redwoods, or spending time with her family.

