



The Gatekeeper

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THEN

I knew from a young age that I was a strange child. The whispers, the stares, and the nervousness that I invoked from adults that met me were not uncommon. While I accepted my strangeness, I chose to hide it so that I could put others at ease. That's when the whispers stopped and people relaxed when they were around me.

In the winter of my fifteenth year, I visited my Grandmother Taurus' home for the last time in Michigan. My father and his girlfriend were meeting my flight and I practically raced into my father's arms when I saw him. He introduced me to his girlfriend, Lila, and I held out my hand timidly to greet her. There were light shadows swirling around her, but I ignored them as Lila embraced me and told me how happy she was to finally meet me in person.

Father was watching me carefully as I pulled out of Lila's embrace, but I made no motion to indicate what I had seen. "When are we leaving for Grandmother's? I'm anxious to see her," I asked.

"You want to see her?" Lila echoed, her head tilted to its side. Her face was grim.

"Now. We leave now," my father murmured.

Silently, we slid into the leather seats of the rental car and Father drove us to Grandmother Taurus' home. The sunlight had faded and we were left in darkness as we sat in the driveway staring at the large, white house with green trim around the doors and windows. There was no warm glow from the lights shining brightly inside and there would be no smell of fresh hot chocolate waiting for us. A tear slid down my cheek and I smiled at the memory that was my grandmother.

The car doors opening were almost deafening as they broke the silence and Father removed the suitcases from the trunk. He nearly slid on the icy driveway and I shivered against the cold, hoping that it was least warm inside the house.

It wasn't and my father immediately went to the thermostat to increase the temperature. "I told Leonard to crank up the heat," he complained.

Lila placed her hand on Father's arm, calming him. "James, he was probably just thinking about the bill."

Father sighed. "You're right. We'll have to split everything until the house is sold." He sighed once more and looked around. "It's going to be a nightmare going through all of this. I don't think that Mom threw anything away."

I left the adults alone as I walked through the house and let the memories wash over me. There were three bedrooms and I stopped at the second one. Here is where I had stayed countless times over the years, sleeping comfortably underneath a hand-made quilt in one of the two twin beds. The other bed was occupied by one of my parents—usually my mother—who took me to visit Grandmother Taurus.

I was on the opposite side of the house where *he* had been when I decided to turn away. As I moved, I bumped into my father who was standing behind me, my suitcase in his hand.

"Already checking out your room, Lucy?" he asked. He brushed past me and toward the third bedroom.

I followed reluctantly, pausing in the doorway. I was unable to move forward. The room itself was not intimidating: there was a hospital bed, a wheelchair, an antique dresser, and a walnut chair within it. Flashes of my grandfather went through my mind as I imagined him lying

in bed, never speaking and hardly moving. I had not known him well and he had been dead for seven years. In that seven years, I had never set foot inside this room.

A grey shadow hovered in the air and I felt a cold presence pressing all around me. I swallowed involuntarily and took a step backward, bumping into my father. I turned to face him, ashamed. "Please don't make me sleep in here," I whispered.

Without a word, he led me to the second bedroom. Lila stopped unpacking and scowled as my father put my suitcase at the foot of a bed and grabbed his own.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"I think that it's best that I sleep in Dad's old room," my father lied.

Lila's jaw tensed as she debated further arguing, but she remained quiet and merely nodded in agreement.

"It's okay, Father," I said softly. "I'll sleep in Grandmother's room."

He looked at me sharply, as if I was breaking a code by going into his mother's room so soon after her death. "I don't know," he began, then stopped, his chest heaving. "I don't know if the sheets have been changed."

"It's all right. I'll do it."

"Don't do it now. Get changed and we'll pick up dinner before going to the viewing."

I hesitated. "I don't know if I'm hungry enough to eat right now." I glanced between Father and Lila and felt them relax with relief. They weren't in the mood to eat, either. I stood awkwardly before them for a beat longer before picking up my suitcase and carrying it to my grandmother's bedroom.

It was the smallest bedroom, though she preferred it because she always liked to feel cozy. The wallpapered walls were black with deep purple and grenadine floral print with matching burgundy lace curtains. A yellow wingback chair was in the corner, next to her closet, with a black and purple quilt that she had finished shortly before her death. Her bed was heavy mahogany with rose-colored sheets and a thick comforter.

I felt no malignant presence in this room. It was quite the opposite: warm, loving, and peaceful. I touched the quilt that she had made and thought of her old, wrinkled hands skillfully working the needle and a bottle of aspirin nearby to combat her arthritis. I walked over to the bed and sat down, thinking. I leaned over and smelled the pillow, inhaling her scent. She had always smelled like freshly shaved coconut. My eyes watered and I knew I couldn't bring myself to put on fresh sheets. I wanted to feel close to her just one more time.

Father called for me and I rushed to change into my wool trousers and gold sweater that Grandmother had purchased for me for my last birthday. I shrugged on my black wool coat and the three of us faced the cold once more that night.

After the viewing, we retreated back to the empty house where Father made grilled cheese sandwiches and Lila heated up tomato soup from a can. "This was my favorite meal when I was a child," he said, placing a bowl and plate in front of me.

"I wish that I could have met Mrs. Taurus more than once," Lila commented. "She really was quite a woman."

"She was," I agreed.

After finishing the dishes, I said good night and retreated back to Grandmother's room. I had just crawled underneath the sheets when a light shadow appeared over the wingback chair.

“Grandmother?” I whispered.

My father knocked twice on the door before opening it and sat down on the edge of the bed. “How are you doing, honey?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” I said, trying to not look at the chair.

Noticing my effort, he looked behind him and sighed. “Is she here?”

I nodded. “Have you told Lila?”

“That you can communicate with spirits? No,” he replied. Hastily he added, “Not yet.”

“Oh,” was all that I could muster. I stared across the room at the shadow.

Father cleared his throat. “Is she talking yet?”

With those words, the shadow drifted over so that it was next to him and solidified so that Father could see her as well. It was Grandmother Taurus, but not as she was before she died. She was young again with her hair curling around her ears in her 1920s bob and her dress was a simple white frock with a low waist.

Father shuddered, obviously startled.

“They can do that if they really want you to see them,” I explained. “Hello, Grandmother,” I greeted softly.

Grandmother Taurus smiled brightly. “Don’t be so sad, my dear. I’m dead, but I have a lot of life left in me.” She looked at something that we could not see. “It’s so incredible here. Truly, it is the most beautiful place that I’ve ever seen.” She reached out and brushed her son’s cheek with the back of her hand. “You’re going to be okay, James.”

Father wiped his cheeks. “I feel like an orphan,” he said sadly.

Grandmother hugged him tightly. “No, don’t feel like that. We’ll all be together one day. I promise. Be happy. Be strong. Enjoy your life on Earth and know that I love you.”

“You’re not hanging around, are you?” I asked hopefully.

“I only have two more things that I need to do and then I will be gone,” Grandmother answered. “I won’t be a spirit trapped here.”

I felt my breath escape my lungs in relief.

“James, I need to speak with your daughter alone. Whatever you hear, stay away. She will be safe.”

“I love you,” my father murmured, his voice small.

“I love you, too, James,” she replied. When he was gone, she turned to face me. “You looked so pretty tonight, Lucy. I see that you wore that sweater. I just knew that you would love it.” She touched my chocolate curls that matched her own. “It looks so lovely on you.”

“Thank you,” I said, my voice cracking with emotion.

Grandmother inhaled deeply. “You know we need to do something about your grandfather.”

I blanched. “We can do something? What is it?”

Her brows knitted in worry. “I should have told you this before I died, but I truly thought that I had more time.”

“What did you have to tell me?” I asked curiously.

“Come with me,” Grandmother instructed. She walked to the door and turned, beckoning me to follow her.

I slid my feet into a pair of fuzzy green slippers and tiptoed quietly behind her, trying not

to disturb Lila. With Father not telling her my secret, she would faint at the sight of the woman she had just seen lying in a casket only an hour earlier.

Outside of the doorway to the third bedroom, I stopped. The presence was stronger and angrier and bouncing around from wall to wall. I backed away, frightened.

“He’s stuck in there,” Grandmother reassured me.

“Stuck?” I echoed.

“He wasn’t ready to leave yet and I wasn’t ready to send him on his way, so I trapped him inside here,” she explained.

“But why? Why would you do that?”

“I wasn’t ready for him to go to Hell,” Grandmother answered quietly.

“Why would he go to Hell?” I shifted uncomfortably, unwilling to go inside the bedroom.

“He did something,” she said simply. “You don’t need to know what. I don’t want his memory marred. My sons thought the world of their father.”

“But Father knows that I’m scared of this room,” I pointed out.

Grandmother looked at me and frowned. “Did you ever tell him who it is that’s inside?”

“No,” I admitted.

“Good.” She grabbed my hand and, upon entering the room, the walls rippled. The shadow flitted about more quickly until her arm lashed out and she grasped it. The shadow immediately solidified and there he was, my grandfather, with eyes full of rage and hate. He was scowling and struggling as he tried to free himself from his wife’s grip. “Settle down, Luke,” she said calmly.

“Edna,” he spat. “You traitorous witch!”

“I’m no witch,” my grandmother declared. “But you know what I am.”

“You’ve condemned me!” he screamed.

“You condemned yourself,” she corrected. “But I loved you anyway,” she said, her voice softening.

To me, she said, “Watch carefully, Lucy.” Her fingers tightened, her mouth uttering words so ancient that I couldn’t recognize them. The room was plunged into darkness and a fire erupted beneath my grandfather’s feet. He screamed painfully while tears flowed freely down Grandmother’s face.

The walls rippled once more and he was gone. For the first time since being inside the room, I felt like I could breathe freely. The presence was no longer there.

Grandmother was still crying as she faced me. She spoke to me for a while, my mind losing track of time as time as her lips moved in explanation.

“I... I don’t understand,” I stammered.

She gently touched my cheek. “You will. Heaven and Hell are real, Lucy. And you’re a Gatekeeper.”

NOW

The house loomed over me, the trees casting patches of dark shadows over the sprawling yard. They were just beginning to turn in response to autumn and I breathed in their fresh, clean scent. The air was crisp with a morning chill, though I knew that I would be removing my jacket that afternoon as the sun warmed the earth.

I walked back from the mailbox and sat on my front porch swing, the lazy movement of being rocked back and forth nearly putting me to sleep as I waited. The smell of hot chocolate wafted toward me and I sat up straighter, thinking of my Grandmother Taurus. It had been eleven years since she had died, though she sent signs once in a while to remind me that she was watching. "I'll make some for them when they get here," I promised, looking upward at the clear blue sky.

As if on cue, the sound of an engine interrupted the silence and an older blue Jeep Cherokee pulled into my driveway. It came to stop in front of the garage at the side of the house and I eagerly sat up and rushed down the stairs.

"Mary!" I said excitedly as I approached the Jeep.

"Lucy!" she replied, throwing her arms around me. "It's so wonderful to see you again!"

"Where is the little guy?" I asked, peering into the back seat.

Mary opened the back door to reveal an infant boy, only two months old, sleeping soundly in his car seat.

"Mary," I whispered, "he's so precious! How did he get even cuter since I saw him last?"

My cousin laughed. "I didn't think it was possible, but Jack is sweeter every day." She reached inside and unbuckled his seatbelt. "Come on, honey. It's time to wake up. We're here at Lucy's house. Do you remember Lucy? She's our favorite cousin."

I blushed. "Oh, stop it," I said, walking to the back of the Jeep to retrieve her suitcases.

"It's true," Mary said, cradling Jack. "I can't even begin to explain how grateful I am that you're taking us in for the next couple of weeks while Alex is on his business trip." She scoffed. "I know they only do their big company retreat once a year, but I wish that it wasn't mandatory. Not with a little one at home waiting for his daddy."

"You'll be aching for the time apart when Jack is older. Jack can be in his bedroom playing video games while you sit downstairs watching some awful girly movie and drink a cheap glass of wine because you can't tell the difference," I assured her.

"Are you saying that I won't get any 'me time' until Jack is a pre-teen?" Mary asked, incredulous.

"Maybe," I laughed. I pulled a bassinet from the back and tucked it under my arm. With my free hand, I grabbed a suitcase and stepped out from behind the Jeep. Seeing Jack, I dropped the suitcase and felt my throat tighten. Grey and black shadows swirled around him that hadn't been there before.

"Lucy? Is something wrong?" Mary's lips had formed a straight line. "Are you sick?" She instinctively pulled Jack away from my direction.

"Head rush," I murmured. "It got hotter out here sooner than I had expected. Let's go inside and you can make yourself at home while I bring in the rest of your stuff."

Mary tossed her honey-blond hair over her shoulder. "Okay. I'll pour us some lemonade." She paused. "You do have lemonade, don't you?"

"In this weather? Lemonade in the afternoon and hot chocolate in the evening."

I watched her carefully as she took Jack inside, the shadows following closely. Where had they come from? What did they want with a baby?

Inside my house, I felt the frigid air against my skin. The shadows were everywhere, crowding the room and angrily bumping into each other.

“It’s awfully chilly in here. Are you trying to hang meat in your house?” Mary teased. She reached for the thermostat and stopped. “It’s not even on,” she muttered, confused. “You must be keeping the windows open at night to trap the cool air so that it won’t be so hot during the day.” She shook her head. “This is such a beautiful yet awkward time of year, isn’t it? Who says Tennessee doesn’t experience cooler weather?”

“Those who live in Michigan and think we’re basking in humidity year-round,” I replied drily. I forced a grin. “It’s not that bad.”

My cousin yanked the royal blue throw from the back of my couch and draped it over Jack. “Does the blanket make you feel warmer?” she asked. “It’s soft, isn’t it, sweetie?”

Jack kicked his feet happily and giggled. Mary leaned over and nuzzled her nose against his. “That’s my sweet boy. Melting Mommy’s heart every moment.”

“Why don’t I show you and Jack to your rooms?” I suggested. I picked up Jack, blanket and all, and led the way down the hallway. The atmosphere grew colder as more shadows followed and I took him into the smallest bedroom.

I could feel Mary step by my side and hesitate. I knew what she was going to say before she even thought it, though I needed Jack to be in this room.

“I think that it’s best that Jack stays with me while we’re here,” she said slowly.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought he had his own room back home,” I apologized.

“He does, but he’ll be fine sharing a room with me for a couple of weeks,” Mary replied, her voice bolder.

“I understand.” I waited for Mary to leave first, then touched the walls. They rippled slightly, trapping the spirits within it. As I walked away, no more spirits were attached to Jack and I ignored their moans as they flung themselves against their enclosure. The baby peered over my shoulder, seeing nothing but a country-style guest room in shades of green.

“You really outdid yourself in here, didn’t you?” Mary gushed. She ran her hands over the fluffy red comforter. “You didn’t have to do this for me. I know the last time that I was here, you barely had anything in this room. Just a bed and a small dresser that could fit a shirt and that’s about it.”

“It motivated me to actually do some decorating. Moving out of the one-bedroom apartment to a house with three bedrooms was a huge step. I’m not used to having so much room to myself,” I said. “You kind of décor-shamed me into this, but that’s okay. I needed it.”

Mary took Jack from my arms and smiled. “I love it! Now you just need to fill your home with a family,” she suggested, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

“Uncle Leonard doesn’t know that he had a matchmaker for a daughter, does he?”

“No, Dad still has a hard time believing that I’m married with a child. I’m still his little girl in his eyes.” She looked out the window. “Do you remember how much time we spent playing outside at Grandma Taurus’ place? I loved her backyard. I’d love for Alex to build a treehouse for Jack the way that Grandpa did for us at Grandma’s. Wouldn’t that be neat?”

I shifted uncomfortably at the thought of our grandfather. “I suppose.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Mary asked, worried.

“I’m fine,” I lied. “I was just thinking about the time that I was visiting and Grandmother caught you and Howie making out in that treehouse.” I chuckled.

Mary burst into laughter. “She was furious! She was supposed to be inside making her

famous blackberry pie.”

“Why don’t we make some this evening? We’ll have hot chocolate and blackberry pie in honor of her,” I recommended.

Mary poked at her stomach. “You’re making it awfully hard for me to lose this baby weight, but that sounds like a great idea.”



I lied in bed, waiting for Mary to fall asleep. I listened as she placed Jack into the crib that I had purchased at a consignment shop and sang him a lullaby that I didn’t recognize. Ten minutes later, she crawled into bed and I waited for another twenty before getting out of my own. I slowly walked to the end of the hall and opened the door to the last bedroom, the walls heaving as I entered.

The shadows were groaning and shouting at me and I waited until one pressed against me. I grabbed its throat and watched it solidify into a middle-aged man with a malicious grin.

“You can’t stop us,” he seethed. “This is temporary.”

“Why do you want Jack?” I asked, unafraid. These weren’t the first spirits that I had sent to Hell.

“He belongs to us!” another spirit hissed, solidifying on his own. He reached to grab my own throat and disappeared in a flame once his ghoulish skin touched my own.

The spirit in my grasp stared at me, shocked. “You’re a Gatekeeper!”

I shook him. “Why Jack?” I demanded.

His eyes slid down to his mouth. “Send me to Hell. I’ll never tell you.”

“With pleasure,” I said, and he burst into flames.

One by one, I sent each spirit to Hell until a light grey one remained. His coloring wasn’t as dark, meaning he wasn’t as evil as the others, and I waited for him to approach me. Careful not to touch me, he solidified.

He was younger and dressed as a Civil War soldier from the Confederate Army. “Please, help me,” he begged. “You can choose where to send me. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“If that were the case, you’d be a light-colored shadow or would have moved on completely without my help.”

“My brother was a Yankee,” he explained quietly. “I had to kill him to prove my loyalty to Captain Anderson. He would have killed me otherwise.”

“Bloody Bill Anderson?” I clarified.

“The one and only,” the dead soldier answered.

“Were you dead before the massacre in Centralia, Missouri?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I died of starvation in the winter of 1863.”

“Why do you want Jack?”

“I was told that turning him evil would release me. I don’t care where I go,” the spirit said miserably. “It’s so cold and dark on this side. I relive the moment I pulled the trigger over and over. I’ve watched the rest of my family grow old, die, and go to Heaven. I can only watch their spirits rise and I’m not even allowed to talk to them. I’m already in Hell, aren’t I?”

“Hell is much worse,” I said flatly. “Who told you to turn Jack evil? How do you know that, when exposed to your presence, it will influence his will over time?”

“Because he told us,” the dead soldier answered simply.

“Who is ‘he’?” I prompted.

“He’s a demon,” he whispered.

“He’s a dead human,” I countered.

“Oh, no. He’s a demon. A real demon and he wants control.”

I shook my head. “I’ve never seen a demon and I’ve been at this for eleven years.”

“He’s real and, if he wants your cousin, he’s going to take him. We’re not the only ones who were sent here.”

“He can’t be that smart. He sent spirits to the home of a Gatekeeper. He knows that I have the power to send you up or down.”

“You don’t understand yet,” said the spirit. “He’s testing you.”

“I see,” I replied.

“Can you end me? You don’t have to send me anywhere, but can you remove me from existence? Isn’t there an in-between?” the spirit pleaded. With his confession, his shadow lightened.

As I reached out to take his hands into my own, he burst into flames and I shoved away from him, startled.

He screamed as he was removed from this realm and, in his place, stood a spirit so dark that he *absorbed* light. He was tall with glowing red eyes and horns that sprouted from his head as he walked toward me. His footsteps left charred marks on the wooden floor.

I stood in place, a pit of ice forming in my stomach. “What did you do with him?” I asked, struggling to remain calm.

“I did what he wanted: I removed him from this existence.” The demon sneered. “Snitch. I expected more from a soldier.”

Without further words, I lurched forward and placed my hands on the demon’s chest. He roared with rage as the flames engulfed his feet. “*Teigh vu ifreansi!*” I shouted. Go to Hell!

The flames reduced to burning embers and the demon laughed. He threw me against the wall, my head slamming against the door upon impact. He laughed mirthlessly. “There is nothing that you can do.” He yanked my arm upward, dragging me to my feet, and put his face directly in front of mine. He smelled of sulfur. “I’ll see you soon, Gatekeeper.”

In an instant, he was gone. My head swimming, I fell to my knees and crawled to Mary’s room. “Mary,” I called weakly. “Mary!”

The door flung open and Mary appeared, Jack already dressed and clutched tightly in her arms. “What happened?” she demanded.

“We have to go. *Now.*” She helped me to my feet and threw some of my belongings into a duffel bag. Warily, we went outside to her Jeep and piled inside, Jack already falling back asleep in his car seat.

Mary fished in around her diaper bag and handed me a wet wipe. “For the blood,” she said, pointing to the back of my head. I gingerly touched my scalp and drew back my hand; it was sticky with red liquid. She gunned the engine and we skidded away from my home. “Where are we going? What in the hell happened back there?”

“Drive west. Go to Pigeon Forge. It’s a busier city. I doubt he’ll come to such a populated place. The lights and sounds tend to spook away the spirits.” I smiled sardonically.

Mary glanced in my direction. “There are more wet wipes in the bag. Do we need to go to a hospital?”

“No, I’ll be fine. Really. Just drive.” I delicately wiped the blood from the back of my head. It was already congealing and matting my hair.

We spent the next half hour in silence. There were no shadows following us and I began to feel the tension drain from my muscles. “Do you know what a Gatekeeper is, Mary?” I asked quietly, careful not to wake Jack.

“I don’t,” she replied, her eyes fixated on the dark road ahead of us.

“A Gatekeeper is someone on Earth who can send spirits to Heaven or Hell,” I explained.

Mary glanced back at her son sleeping peacefully. “Why is a Gatekeeper needed? Isn’t there just the one?” She pointed upward toward the starry sky.

“There is the Ultimate Gatekeeper. He or she has the final decision, but the Ultimate relies on the rest of us to help make those choices.”

“What about these spirits? What are they like?”

“They usually stay in one place, but—and it’s rare—they can haunt a person. Sometimes they get trapped, stuck behind here because they are either unwilling to move on or because they really do have something left to do. They show up as shadows and their color varies, depending on how good they are.”

My cousin frowned, her brows furrowed. “I knew something was wrong. I can’t see them the way that you can, but I just *felt* like something was off. Alex and I took Jack to a farm to look at pumpkins. It’s an older farm and has been passed down from father to son for generations and I thought it’d be cute to get some photos of him there. There’s an old barn that just gave me the creeps and I could have sworn that I saw something in the window, but just shrugged it off as the sunlight hitting it in an odd way.”

“Did you go near the barn?”

“No, they don’t really use that one anymore except to store hay. They have a newer one that they built within the last twenty years where they keep their horses.”

I bit my lip, thinking. “Did you feel like you were being watched?” I finally asked.

Mary visibly quivered. “I did,” she answered softly. “I didn’t tell anyone, though.”

“I understand.” I inhaled deeply. “When did you go?”

“Just a week ago, when they started offering activities at the farm for kids.” She shrugged. “I know he’s just a baby, but I wanted him to see his first pumpkin patch and get his little face painted.” She shook her head worriedly. “I should never have taken him there.”

I reached out and patted her shoulder. “You didn’t know, Mary. Spirits are everywhere and they usually aren’t so bad. They’re just lost, trying to find their way.”

“Do you help them?”

“No. I see their color and I send them up or down,” I replied.

“Why don’t you help them?” she asked curiously.

I felt my chest tighten. I did not want to answer her question and worry her further.

“Even the ones that aren’t so dark? Why don’t you help them?” she pressed, ignoring my discomfort.

“Because the dark spirits can affect us if they hang around us for too long. They can sway us to be like them,” I answered.

“What?” Mary asked, nearly shrieking. Jack stirred in his car seat and she lowered her voice. “Is he already affected?”

“Not yet. They haven’t had enough time.”

“Why do they want my son?”

“I don’t know, Mary,” I answered honestly.

“You’re like Grandma Taurus, aren’t you?”

“I am,” I admitted.

Mary nodded knowingly. “I knew something was strange about her. I never shared the same closeness with her like you did. Now I understand why.”

“I didn’t know about this until after she died.”

“Did she make you this way? Did she pass this on to you?” my cousin asked. She approached Exit 407 and took it, driving the loop that led us around to the mouth of Pigeon Forge. It was so late that there were hardly any other cars on the road and we cruised easily from red light to red light without the usual bumper to bumper traffic.

“No, a person is born this way. It’s...” my voice trailed off.

“Destiny,” she finished.

“Yes, I suppose that it is. I can’t change it.” A large, log sign advertising cabin rentals appeared and I motioned for Mary to turn right. “This is a busy time of year for cabin rentals, but it’s the middle of the week and we should be able to get one.”

Crossing my fingers that someone would still be in the main office, I turned the knob to open the front door. It opened without a sound and I quickly acquired a cabin for the minimum two-night stay. Within a few minutes, Mary and I were pulling into the driveway of a small, one bedroom cabin and unloading our belongings.

I flipped on every light and searched the cabin before determining that it was safe. Mary and Jack fell asleep immediately in the bedroom while I sat on the couch, waiting. “I need your help,” I said into the empty room.

She appeared as she had before, though she was transparent. Her white frock floated around her and she looked me sadly.

“I knew you would be able to return.”

“It’s because I *chose* to leave the first time,” Grandmother Taurus explained.

“I know he’s going to find us.”

“Yes, he will,” she responded gravely.

“Why does he want Jack? Why is he sending other spirits after him? He can’t guarantee their entry to Heaven. They’re too dark. The Ultimate will never allow it.”

“Oh, yes. The Ultimate would.” Grandmother looked at me expectedly. “Eventually,” she added cryptically.

A flash went off in my mind. “No, he can’t be,” I said in disbelief.

“But he is,” she insisted. Her body floated up and down as if her whole form was nodding.

“He’s just a baby. He can’t possibly be an Ultimate,” I insisted.

“You said it yourself, my dear. It’s his destiny. He cannot change it. Upon his death, he will take the place of our present Ultimate. It’s been two-hundred years. It’s his time,” she said gently.

“The dark spirits will never stop going after him,” I said, my voice breaking. “They can influence him to allow more of their kind inside the Gates.” I covered my face with my hands. “How I can I protect him for the rest of his life? I can’t be near him constantly, Grandmother. He’ll never have a normal life.” I let my hands fall to my lap. “I don’t even know how to protect him from the demon.”

“You’ll figure out a way,” Grandmother murmured.

“And the demon? What do I do with the demon?” I stood and began to pace.

“You’re stronger than you think, Lucy,” she said, fading.

“Please, don’t leave me yet!” I begged. “I need you!”

“Everything you need is in here,” Grandmother Taurus replied, placing her hand over my heart.

In an instant, I understood. I collapsed, falling heavily onto the couch. I looked up, yearning for more reassurance from my grandmother.

She was gone.



The sun slowly lowered itself beneath the horizon, the brilliant colors it cast waning along with it.

Mary’s honey-blond hair was disheveled and her brown eyes were darting frantically around the room, straining to see what I could.

“There’s nothing in here,” I reassured her. I placed my hand over Jack’s head and kissed his forehead. When I straightened, I saw the shadows flickering outside the window. “Mary,” I began, “do not leave this room.” Hearing the lock engage behind me, I stood in the middle of the living room and inhaled deeply.

The pawns poured in through the windows, solidifying as they rushed me. They burst into flames and disappeared, leaving me alone with the remaining shadows. “You won’t survive this,” I said calmly.

“We’ll be waiting,” one snickered.

They disappeared as the darkest shadow entered the room. I dropped to my knees, slamming my palms against the floor. The entire room rippled violently, trapping it inside.

The demon’s lips parted, revealing rows of pointed teeth so white that I looked away involuntarily, unnerved by their perfection. He touched the walls and withdrew his hand, a brief moment of surprise crossing his face. “Do you think that I mind you keeping me in here with you?” he said scornfully.

Moving so fast that my vision couldn’t keep up, he sped across the room and threw me back against the patio door, the glass shattering upon impact. I scrambled to my feet, ignoring the cuts trickling blood and dropping in splatters onto the wooden floor. I shouted incomprehensibly as I ran toward him, my hands outstretched. They landed on his chest and his feet were immediately on fire.

The demon grabbed my wrists and threw me upward. I hit a decorative beam on the cabin’s ceiling and gravity pulled me quickly down, smashing my body. I struggled to breathe as I stood shakily. My left wrist was broken, my hand hanging limply by my side. I could feel a gash on my back that started to bleed more profusely and I gritted my teeth against the pain.

His clawed hand lashed out, hitting me directly in the sternum and knocking me to my knees. I choked for air, my heart thudding loudly in my chest and threatening to burst through. He leisurely walked to the bedroom and dragged his nail down the door. "I'm not going to kill you yet, Gatekeeper. I want you to see this." The demon opened the door and Mary screamed, able to see him for the first time. He had *wanted* her to see him, to be terrified.

She fiercely clung Jack to her chest as the demon stood in the doorway. "Lucy!" she cried out. "Lucy!"

An invisible barrier between the two rooms sparked and the demon roared with outrage.

My grin was blood-filled as I crawled to the coffee table and used it to help myself back to my feet. "You can't get to him."

He angrily turned to face me. "I will when you're dead." He rushed me once more.

I held out my arms as if to embrace him and held him tightly as we tumbled to the ground. We rolled over top of each other, me controlling the movement until we were to the shattered glass of the patio door. Grabbing a shard, I yanked it across my broken wrist and let the blood fall onto the demon.

He screamed in agony as the blood sizzled on his skin. Smoke rose from his body as my wounds bled onto him, covering him entirely.

I laughed as I whispered in his ear. "*Teigh vu ifreansi!*"

The flames erupted, gushing over his writhing form. I held onto him, the fire licking my skin. He crumpled to ashes beneath me and the room flashed a pure, magnificent white.

And then my pain was no more.



NEXT

Jack cooed as Mary tucked Grandmother's black and purple quilt around his small body. She gently kissed him goodnight and shut off the night.

Before closing the door, she murmured, "Keep him safe, Lucy."

I floated into the rocking chair next to the crib. Jack's eyes shifted to my light shadow and he smiled.

"Always."