

## Excerpt from “Bones of a Witch”

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Tony Marcella:

Two days after Lilith went downtown to give Harvey Goodman a piece of her mind, his office called back to tell her where she could go to pick up the bones. I thought she'd be gone for a while, and so I used that time to work on a spell I had tried to perfect before showing her that I could actually perform witchcraft. In the past I had managed to whip up a neat little level one charm known as a whisper box, which went over well when I used it on Lilith. Unfortunately, further attempts to employ witchcraft have proved unsuccessful; earning me only digs and jabs from her after having them blow up in my face. For that reason I stopped attempting anything to do with magic in front of her.

It was nearly sunset when I heard her key in the door lock. I was about to attempt one of the most difficult exploits known to witchcraft, something I'm sure Lilith expects will take me years to accomplish. But instead of fiddling with cutesy beginners stuff like whisper boxes and image casting, I decided my first real feat should be something that totally knocks her socks off. It's a cloaking spell that's taken me nearly eighteen months to figure out, but if it works, it should get Lilith off my back about practicing magic once and for all.

She came through the door as I expected she might after having dealt with the bureaucratic pinheads downtown: bumptious, restive and cynical; Lilith that is, not the bureaucrats. Right away she started in, firing off sarcastic sound bites in quick salvos about grave robbers and witch hunters. I heard her say something about a lost key or a medallion or something, but frankly, she wasn't making much sense to me. I just know

that she was really steamed. I let her rant for awhile without interrupting. It's a process best left to its own device. Even when she asks how someone can be so stupid, I've learned to let it go unanswered. If it's not hypothetical then she'll ask again. Until then I simply keep quiet.

Even as she wound down, she never mentioned anything to me about the pages of notes I had strewn upon the table, or the candles burning in a circle around me. As it was, I barely got a word in edgewise, except to suggest we go out for a bite to eat after she calmed down a notch or two and maybe changed into something more comfortable. Boy, what a mistake that was.

"What's wrong with the way I'm dressed?" she hissed. Ooh, like I could have touched that one.

"Nothing," I said, shrinking back some.

"Then why should I change?"

I pointed at her pants. "Your jeans are dirty."

She bent over and inspected her legs, brushing what I thought were dirt stains on her knees. "This?" She swatted a final time at one of the spots before narrowing her brows at me. "These aren't stains. This is how they're made."

I laughed, thinking she was kidding. But when her brows did not find a level medium, I realized she wasn't. "You bought them with stains already in them?"

"Of course." She turned around and showed me her ass, which also had mud stains on the cheeks, as well as holes in both pockets.

I shook my head. "So, were they on sale or something?"

"Shaa, if you call a hundred and twenty bucks a sale."

"You spent a hundred and twenty dollars on a pair of torn, dirty jeans?"

She turned and headed off into the bedroom. I hurried up and snuffed the candles out and collected my notes off the table. She came out a few minutes later wearing different jeans, these with ragged holes in the knees, a tear up the side of one leg and the back left pocket completely unstitched, save for the two rivets anchoring the top corners, which left it flapping in the breeze like a trap door. I honestly don't know what made me do it, but I had this feeling. I asked her to turn around for me, which she did. Then I lifted the flap to reveal a hole beneath it nearly as large, exposing a sizable patch of her bare ass and her tattoo of a cat's paw. I let the flap drop, but not before pinching the paw and making her jump.

“Nice touch. Those jeans come that way?”

She smiled coyly. “Like`em? I bought them with you in mind.”

I smiled back. “So, you do love me.”

She hissed cat-like, gesturing a claw swipe at my face. It was the closest thing to yes I was likely to get, so I grabbed the car keys and escorted her to the door. We were just passing the threshold when the phone rang. I suggest we let the machine get it, fearing it might be Carlos or Spinelli wanting me to come back to the office for something silly, like the last time when they handcuffed themselves to the desks to see who could go the longest without a trip to the vending machine. What they hadn’t counted on, however, was their need to use the men’s room to displace a full pot of coffee. Anyone there could have gotten them un-cuffed, but they knew that only I would do it without telling the captain what a bonehead stunt they pulled. Of course it didn’t come without a cost. Between the two of them, I ate lunch free for a week.

In most instances Lilith would also prefer to let the answering machine pick up the call, but for some reason this time she didn’t. I say for some reason, when really I know why. As always, Lilith knows when the phone is for her. Usually she even *knows* who it is before she picks up. I could tell this time, though; the call took her by complete surprise. Her side of the conversation went something like this:

“Hello? What? The medallion? Who is this? How did you— Where? Yes, when? I’ll be there.”

As soon as she hung up I could see it on her face that something was not right. She seemed both perplexed and suspicious at the same time. Her eyes narrowed down to tiny slots the way they sometimes do when I tell her a lie and she knows it. It’s a glare that seems to cut right through me, and I was glad this time it was not meant for me.

“Is everything all right?” I asked.

“What?”

“That call; is everything all right?”

She nodded slowly, her gaze set off somewhere else entirely. “Yes, fine.”

“Who was it?”

Now our eyes met, and she appeared to snap out of whatever frame of mind had momentarily consumed her. “No one.” She reached for the car keys and snatched them from me. “I gotta go.”

“Where?”

“To see a man.”

“But what about—”

“We’ll eat later.”

And like that, she was gone. I grabbed a beer from the fridge, hit the couch and flicked on the television. Whatever she had to do, I figured I’d know soon enough. She never keeps secrets from me anymore. We just have that kind of relationship.

Lilith Adams:

As soon as I walked in the door I knew that Tony had been working on a spell of some sort. He had his notes sprawled out over the kitchen table and his candles all burning in a circle around him. He thought I didn't notice, but I noticed. If he had asked I'd have told him that he had the candles all wrong. The yellow ones are supposed to be situated at the compass points: north, east, south and west, with the brown one aligned with the current position of the moon. I mean any witch worth her salt knows that.

Anyway, he didn't ask, so I didn't tell. I'm just glad to see him working on his witchcraft. I guess my bitching is paying off. If he decides he wants help with his whisper box or image casting, then all he has to do is say the word. In the meantime I certainly don't need him critiquing my wardrobe. Do you know he actually believes the mud-stained jeans come that way now? I know, what a hoot. He is too cute, I swear. I can't believe how easy it is to fool him sometimes.

Of course, he wasn't fooled for a minute with that phone call I got. Even before I picked it up I knew it wasn't going to be good. I got this weird sense of otherness from the caller, like maybe I wasn't really talking to the person whose voice I was hearing. Strange, I know. It's so mysterious. *He* was so mysterious. I got the feeling he knew me, or worse, that he knew I was a witch and that's the real reason he wanted to meet with me. But you had to read into it to hear it from our conversation. He started off by saying, "I have something you want." It's a great ice-breaker, I'll give you that.

"What?" I said.

"The gate key."

Okay, so now he had my attention. "The Medallion?"

"Yes. And if you want it, you'll have to meet with me."

"Who is this?"

"I'm a friend. That's all you need to know."

"How did you—"

“Not over the phone. We do this in person.”

“Where?”

“The parking garage downtown. It’s quiet there. Will you meet me?”

“Yes, when.”

“Now.”

“I’ll be there.”

At first I thought it might be Carlos or that nerd, Spinelli, playing a practical joke on me. But then I realized that made no sense. Neither have the balls to dare rile me like that.

I suppose I should have told Tony what was going on, I mean I wanted to. But I figured he’d just go off on his high horse and turn it into some gung-ho police operation with helicopters, SWAT teams, dogs; the whole works. Just because this guy stole my aunt’s gate key didn’t mean I couldn’t handle things myself. I’ve dealt with a few seriously shady characters in my life before; I couldn’t imagine some pathetic grave robber posing too much inconvenience for me. So I grabbed the keys from Tony and headed out to the parking garage. I know he thought I’d tell him where I was going, but I wouldn’t. I mean, we have to have some secrets between.

Shades of night had crept in slowly while I was up in the apartment with Tony, so by the time I made it downtown, a sickle-shaped moon already found its perch above the rooftops overlooking the river. The parking garage sits two blocks south of that and worlds away from what little nightlife the downtown corridor offered on a rapidly chilling evening. I suspected that was why my mysterious caller selected that location in the first place.

The garage is an unattended facility; an automated gate at the entrance dispenses time-stamped parking vouchers, which another gate at the exit validates upon departure, accepting payments in a collection basket similar to a toll booth. I imagined that’s another reason my friend picked the place. Witnesses there are far and few between. But I also knew that someone that clever would not bring his car into the garage. Not only would the parking vouchers document his movements, but the cameras set up to catch gate crashers would ID his license plate. With that in mind, I concluded that our meeting was probably scheduled to take place on the ground floor.

I parked my car on Vega Street, one block west of the garage, and walked the back alley to the side door. Once inside, I took up a position along a chain-link fence in the shadow of a cylindrical concrete column. And there I waited.

Only a few minutes later I saw something move behind a distant column on the other side of the fence. I sneaked in closer, keeping in the shadows and watching his behavior closely. He appeared to be hiding as well, something I didn't much like, seeing that he was there to meet me. It made me wonder how he expected me to find him if he acted like he didn't want to be seen.

The answer came sooner than I thought, and in a particularly unsettling way. I was just about to step out into the light and call to him when I heard the ding of an elevator bell signaling it had just hit the ground floor and the doors were opening. I pulled back behind the column; the stranger in the shadows did the same, only now he was in a crouch. I could not see the elevator from my vantage point, but the sound of footsteps told me that a woman, alone and probably in heels, had stepped out and was heading our way. As the footfalls neared, I heard keys jingling and the chirp from her car as she hit the remote entry button her keychain. She had nearly made it to her car when the man straightened up and started towards her.

"Hello, Ms. Adams?" he said, continuing his approach in a convincingly unthreatening manner. "Hi, there, I'm the man who spoke with you over the phone. Can we talk?"

The woman stopped. I could see her tense up, but she did not panic. Clearly, she believed the man thought he knew her. I couldn't see his face, but I imagined as he got closer his smile must have thawed the ice in her veins. She relaxed her arms, allowing her handbag to drop to her side. "I'm afraid you're mistaken," she said, returning a polite smile.

"On the contrary...." He reached under his coat and removed a slender instrument from beneath it, long and shiny and definitely not a gate key. "I'm afraid, Ms. Adams, the mistake was yours for coming out here tonight." and without warning, he plowed the instrument into the woman's stomach with a powerful, twisting thrust.

Her face contorted grotesquely. Her jaw unhinged, but no sound escaped. She fell into her assailant's arms and he drove the blade in deeper, dipping his shoulder low till all her weight rested upon it and the knife. He pulled the blade out and stepped back. The woman fell first to her knees and then on her face, hitting the cold concrete slab with a sickening thud.

I gasped in utter shock. The killer turned with a snap to look at me and then sprang back into the shadows just as I stepped out. I knew he could see me then, and if I were not so emotionally wounded I might have thought of some witchery to stop him in his tracks. I called to him to come to me now, come see what a big man he is when the fury of a witch is released. And had he known of my compromised state of mind he might have taken me up on the offer. Instead, he retreated, fading back like a receding wave, swallowed by the blackness from which he came.

I turned and hurried for the door, pulling the fire alarm on my way out and wiping my prints off the box before exiting. By the time I ran back to my car, the fire trucks were already rumbling down Edgewater, two blocks north of the garage. Not that their speed would make any difference; I knew that. But the sooner they processed the crime scene, the sooner they could restore the poor woman's dignity by getting her body up off the pavement. And maybe then I could concentrate on getting the bastard that killed her.