

Corruption

by

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Chapter 1

Josephine and her two friends, Helen and Alice, gathered at the dining room table of her spacious condo with their mugs of coffee. They all owned their homes in this retirement complex and their ages ranged from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties. Helen wore a bright pink sundress with a pink bow in her fluffy, gray hair. Helen chose not to wear much makeup this morning except for the glossy pink lipstick. She reached out with her gnarly, wrinkled hands to grab the deck of cards and began shuffling them. Alice and Josephine both wore loose-fitting blouses with jeans. Alice's wrinkled face formed a scowl of annoyance as Helen continued shuffling the deck after several long moments. Josephine's body thrummed with energy and her smooth, youthful skin resembled that of someone in their thirties. Josephine was tall and slender with silky, jet black hair and brown eyes. As a category six wizard, she enjoyed the benefits of extremely slow aging and would live a very long life barring any unfortunate accidents. Category six wizards were excellent psychometrists so they were mandated by law to help with any police investigation where lesser wizards were unable to read the crime scene and evidence was lacking.

After the Disaster that had occurred over 50 years ago, virtually everyone in the world had become a wizard of one degree or another. Most individuals measured on the scale of a category two through four. The most prestigious wizard was a five as they had great control as well as massive power. Category six wizards possessed massive amounts of power but it could

be volatile and they sometimes lacked the control needed for complex spells. This is the reason they were required to wear a ring embedded with an aequitas enchantment at all times because they were forbidden to perform anything beyond very simple spells. Any attempt to work with more than a mere trickle of power would cause the aequitas enchantment to knock them unconscious. Theoretically, there was no way to tamper with the magic or to take off the jewelry but Josephine had deactivated the aequitas enchantment in her turquoise ring over a month ago. Alice cast another moody frown at Helen before sipping more coffee and slamming the mug down with much more force than necessary. Helen and Josephine flinched with surprise and gazed at Alice with bemusement.

“You seem a bit grumpy this morning,” Josephine observed.

“Unlike you, I don’t have centuries to wait around while someone shuffles the cards for an eternity,” Alice grumped.

“I’m sorry. I spaced out.” Helen cast an apologetic look at both her friends.

She began passing out cards so they could start playing rummy. They played in companionable silence for a moment until it was Helen’s turn and she was staring at Josephine with intense scrutiny. Alice shot Helen a dirty look and cleared her throat to gain her attention. Josephine looked up from her cards with confusion and her gaze flicked from Alice to Helen.

“Isn’t it your turn, Helen?” Josephine prodded.

“I’ve been noticing something different about you over the last week or so. I finally realized what it is. You’re looking younger.” Helen’s lips curved in a pensive frown.

A pleased laugh bubbled from Josephine. “You flatterer. I’ve been jogging at the beach every morning.”

“She’s right. You definitely look like you’re in your mid-twenties now.” Alice’s expression turned dour with concern.

“You don’t look too happy about it.” Josephine leveled a perturbed look at her friend.

“I think it’s because you’ve been tapping into the vortex at the beach,” Helen said.

There was a power vortex at Siesta Key beach. Normally, category six wizards couldn’t tap into them because of their aequitas enchantments but Josephine took full advantage of her freedom by connecting with the vortex while running at the beach every morning. It always gave her such a rush.

“Helen’s right, you didn’t really start making a habit of it until about two weeks ago. That’s when you changed,” Alice remarked.

“Obviously, it’s done me a world of good! I look and feel great!” Josephine’s face lit up with an ecstatic grin.

“I believe category six wizards that tap into the vortex every day become immortal.” Helen took a sip of her coffee while her friends were shocked into stunned silence. “It’s kind of like being a vampire, I guess.”

Josephine’s eyes flashed with indignation. “I’m not a vampire!”

“We all know there’s no such thing but I think it’s cool you’re like a vampire now. You get to live forever. Think of all the knowledge and life experience you’ll accumulate over the years.” Alice regarded her friend with admiration.

“Why do I get the feeling I’m being insulted?” Josephine grumbled.

“Probably because you’re too sensitive,” Alice said.

“Is that your professional opinion as a retired psychiatrist?” Josephine teased.

“Yes, it is.” Alice jutted her chin out at a stubborn angle. “And I think you need to start taking precautionary steps to protect yourself. You need to start thinking like a vampire.”

“I’m not a vampire!”

“Of course not.” Alice cast a commiserating look at Josephine. “But you have to realize now that you’re an immortal, people will notice after awhile. You’re breaking the law when you tap into the vortex and it’s a federal crime to shut off your aequitas enchantment. You’re bound to get caught at some point – especially if people notice you never age.”

“It will take quite some time before anyone pays attention because they’re used to the fact that I age very slowly,” Josephine said.

“That’s true but you’re going to need to start thinking about the future. You’ll need to learn how to create a new identity for yourself like a vampire would,” Alice explained.

“I wish you’d quit comparing me to vampires.”

Alice offered an apologetic smile. “Sorry, it’s just an easy analogy to make.”

“And they’re your favorite shows,” Josephine said.

“It would be beneficial for you to make connections in the law enforcement,” Helen said.

“I’m already called in practically every week to help out the police,” Josephine grumbled. “I never get to enjoy my retirement. I worked hard for my entire life and I think I deserve some time off.”

“If you live forever, your earlier life is just small change,” Alice pointed out. “I think it would be a good idea if you apply for a full-time position in the workforce. Helen and I found a position for a psychometrist specialist in the police force for the Sarasota-Manatee County districts.”

“The two of you went behind my back and looked at job openings for me?” Josephine sputtered with outrage.

“We’re trying to help you. With your criminal tendencies, we came to the conclusion you would be safer keeping tabs on active investigations in case anyone ever focuses on you,” Alice explained.

“If I worked in Sarasota and Manatee county both, I’d have to do all kinds of traveling. It’s bad enough that I’m forced out of retirement but the thought of driving hundreds of miles every day gives me a headache.”

“You have to think of the positives. You’ll no longer be on a fixed income. You’ll be around young, attractive men,” Helen said.

Josephine cocked a brow of bemusement. “I suppose there might be a few small perks.”

“You’ll probably get to see Jake more often,” Alice pointed out.

Josephine nodded with agreement. Her grandson, Jake, was a detective in his mid-twenties who lived in Sarasota but had little free time to spare. He was lanky with black hair and brown eyes like his grandmother. His dark, smoldering good looks turned a lot of heads. Josephine had advised him on many occasions that he’d make an excellent model and encouraged him to pursue that career so that he wouldn’t have to put in such long hours at the police station. Unfortunately, Josephine couldn’t get him to listen to her sage advice. Youngsters rarely listened to their elders anymore.

“There’s one thing you’re both forgetting. There are two other category six wizards that live in this area. If either one of them applies for the position, I’ll never get it,” Josephine said.

“You can’t think like that. Besides, you’re older than them and have a lot more experience helping the police.” Alice leveled an encouraging look at her friend.

“What about Detective Whiney? I don’t think I could stand working with him all day long, seven days a week,” Josephine said in reference to Detective Riley who was partners with Jake.

“It’s true you’d have to work with him more often but you would be working with all the detectives,” Alice pointed out.

“You should probably stop calling him Detective Whiney,” Helen advised.

“I suppose I could try.” Josephine grimaced as though she’d bitten into something sour. “There are so many concessions I’ll have to make if I give up my comfortable retirement.”

“I don’t really think you like it,” Alice said.

Josephine regarded her friend with puzzlement. “What do you mean?”

“I think you get bored when too much time goes by without a call from Riley,” Alice said. “Whenever you fail to get work after a week or two, you’re just not yourself.”

“All of this is overwhelming. I’ve been out of the workforce for almost a decade. I’d have to whip up a résumé, fill out one of their applications which I’m sure is pages long because it’s a government position, and then I’d need to brush up on my interview technique.”

“Helen and I already created a résumé for you and filled out an application. All you have to do is turn it in,” Alice said.

Josephine smiled at her two friends with affection. “I’m so lucky to have the two of you. I hope we’ll get to keep our morning routine.”

“Of course. We always start around five. You’re always finished with your jog, showered, and changed before then so you’d still have plenty of time to get ready for work after our morning coffee.” Alice leveled an encouraging look at her.

“You’re right.” Josephine was relieved she wouldn’t have to give up the time she spent with her life-long friends.

“How much sleep have you been getting?” Helen asked.

Josephine hesitated as she hadn’t been keeping track. “I guess I only need about five hours.”

“Wow! That really IS like a vampire,” Alice exclaimed.

Josephine shot Alice a dirty look but refrained from arguing the point. Someone knocked at the door. Josephine placed her cards face down on the table with great reluctance as she wondered who could be visiting her at this ungodly hour. Josephine opened the door to reveal three spheres comprised of a viscous black liquid the size of tennis balls floating in front of her face. Josephine yelped with alarm as they swept past her and into the condo. One of the spheres splattered against the living room wall, the second one landed on the floor, and the third splattered near the center of the table. They formed three black puddles of goo and black smoke billowed from them, permeating the air with the distinct odor of skunk. Josephine activated one of her personal shields and stepped out into the hall just in time to see Dale turning the corner as he fled to safety. Dale was a bald man in his seventies with a thin, skeletal frame. He had green eyes and his flabby, wrinkled skin was heavily marred with liver spots.

“I’m going to jinx you good, you old fart!” Josephine called out.

“You don’t belong here, slut!” Dale shouted back from out of sight.

Josephine stepped back into her condo which reeked and was filling up with black smoke.

“Let’s go play cards at my place,” Alice said as she wrinkled her nose with disgust.

“Sounds good to me.” Helen rose from her seat.

“Maybe I should try to neutralize the jinx.” Josephine raised her hands as she viewed the condo with her second sight and focused on the energy matrices that created the odious spells.

“I don’t think so. Last time you tried to do that, you made things even worse,” Alice said. “In two hours or so, the spell will be spent and you can return without any sign of the jinx.”

Alice and Helen lived in the same building so it didn’t take long to arrive in Alice’s condo. The three women resumed their card game at Alice’s table as they waited for fresh coffee to brew.

“Dale is such a pain in the ass. I’m going to make something really special for him.” Josephine’s lips curved in a sadistic smile.

“You should try to mend fences with him. It’s not good having enemies when you’re trying to blend in,” Helen said.

“I don’t see any reason to blend in. I think I’ll booby trap his bed with manifestations of hissing cockroaches that appear as soon as he lays down on it.” Josephine’s eyes twinkled with mirth.

“What happens if one of these days, he follows you to the beach to booby trap your car or something and finds out you’re linking with the vortex there,” Helen said.

Josephine’s expression turned pensive as she mulled this over.

“I don’t think he’d ever do that,” Alice said after a length pause.

“As much as I hate to say it, Helen may be right about this. I really should try to keep a low profile,” Josephine said.

“Let me get that application and resumé that Helen and I finished before I forget.” Alice jumped to her feet and left the room.

She arrived with the documents and set them down in front of Josephine. Josephine threw both her friends grateful smiles.

“I appreciate your help with this,” Josephine said. “I have a lot to consider though.”

“Like what? It makes perfect sense,” Alice argued.

“For one thing I need to talk to Jake. He may not feel comfortable with his grandmother working in the police force,” Josephine said.

“He’s really laid-back. He won’t mind,” Helen said.

“Nevertheless, I’m going to at least talk to him about it. I’ll let myself into his house this afternoon and fix him some dinner. I have a new lasagna recipe I’ve been wanting to try and maybe some peanut-butter fudge cheesecake,” Josephine said.

“That’s very thoughtful of you. I’m sure he’ll be grateful to have a home cooked meal waiting for him after a hard day at work,” Alice said.

“What if tonight’s one of his late nights?” Helen said.

“That’s okay. I’ll bring a book and wait up for him,” Josephine said.

Chapter 2

Josephine inhaled the aroma of her lasagna with satisfaction as it baked in Jake's oven. She had decided to make the cheesecake first as it took longer to set and was cooling in the refrigerator. She had gotten a late start so dinner wasn't quite ready yet even though it was after seven. Jake's house was spacious and tastefully yet modestly furnished and located in an old neighborhood in Sarasota. Jake arrived with a dark-haired young man who was average height with brown eyes and a muscular frame. Like Jake, the stranger was wearing business casual so they were probably colleagues although he looked fresh out of high school. Jake took his grandmother's unexpected visit with his usual grace.

"Hey, Grandma. How's it going?" Jake said.

"Hi, Jake. I thought I'd surprise you with a home-baked dinner," Josephine said.

"Sounds good. This is a new intern at the station I'm working with. His name is Mark Freeman. Mark, this is my grandmother, Josephine O'Connor," Jake said.

Mark's eyes lit up with sudden interest. "You're his grandmother?"

"Yes and I also do part-time consulting for the police as well. That's part of the reason I'm here."

Jake's easy-going smile became business-like and concerned.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Not as such," Josephine said. "I've been thinking long and hard about my life."

Josephine found herself at a loss for words and an uncomfortable silence ensued.

“I think it’s so cool to finally meet you! You’re like a legend!” Mark gushed.

Josephine regarded him with surprise. “Are you serious?”

“Everyone talks about how fast you solve cases when you’re called in.”

Jake threw Mark an amused smirk. “This is only your second day, how can you say you’re excited to FINALLY meet my grandmother?”

“You should hear what everyone says about her,” Mark said. “I wish I was a category six.”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” Josephine said.

“You seem too young to be Jake’s grandmother.”

“I age well. It’s one of the few perks of being a six.” Josephine leveled a pleased smile at Mark.

“You’re beautiful,” Mark said.

“Thank you, young man. I think it runs in the family. Jake is a real looker, too. I keep telling him he should model,” Josephine said.

Jake laughed with mirth and shook his head no.

“You could model, too,” Mark suggested.

Josephine cocked a bemused brow. “I don’t think so.”

“You’re gorgeous. I think you’d do extremely well.”

Josephine turned her attention back to her grandson and cleared her throat as nervousness began to take hold.

“Jake, I’ve decided with how much energy I have and all things considered, I should go back to work. There’s a position open for a full-time psychometrist specialist,” Josephine said.

Jake's smile dropped away as his expression reflected the utter shock her words elicited from him.

"I think that's a great idea! You'd be a shoe-in," Mark said with great enthusiasm.

"What do you mean by that?" Josephine regarded him with puzzlement.

"PD's hardly ever get a six to work for them. They usually don't tolerate the stress of picking up the psychic impressions of violent crime very well," Mark explained.

"He's right. You might want to think about another avenue to work in," Jake suggested.

"I want to work in law enforcement and this is one of the safest positions," Josephine said. "I've been doing part-time consulting work for you and Detective Whiney for years. I know I can handle the psychic energy from crime scenes."

The kitchen timer rang to indicate the lasagna was ready. Josephine pulled it out of the oven and served everyone healthy portions. They gathered at the dining room table to eat and continue their conversation.

"If you can handle the work, I think you should go for it," Jake said.

"I wanted to talk to you first before I did anything because I wasn't sure how you would feel about working with me," Josephine said.

"I think it would be great to see you more often." Jake offered an encouraging smile before he took his first bite of the lasagna. "This is great."

"It sure is. Thank you for including me," Mark said.

"Any friend of Jake's is a friend of mine." Josephine threw him a gracious smile.

"I was wondering if you might want to go out for drinks sometime," Mark said.

Josephine started at the obvious attempt for a date and wondered if this youngster was even past the age of consent yet. Even so, she couldn't imagine ever feeling comfortable going steady with a guy fresh out of high school.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. Exactly how old are you?" Josephine asked.

"I'm eighteen and a legal adult," Mark said.

"But you aren't old enough to drink," Josephine pointed out.

"So?"

"How can we go out for drinks?"

"I was thinking coffee," Mark said.

"I see." Josephine mulled this over for several seconds then decided to throw in a compatibility test she had devised over the years. "How do you like your coffee?"

"With plenty of cream and sugar," Mark replied.

"Do you prefer tea or coffee?"

"Coffee."

"How do you drink your tea?" Josephine asked.

"Same as I do my coffee."

"Do you like dogs and if so what's your favorite kind?"

"I like dogs but I don't really want a pet right now. I prefer small dogs, I guess," Mark said.

Jake's eyes twinkled with mirth as he observed his grandmother interrogating Mark. Jake already knew all about Josephine's test for selecting a suitable match and that Mark had passed with flying colors. Josephine had told Jake on several occasions that no matter how unlikely the

prospect, she would give a guy a chance if he answered her questions correctly. Josephine exchanged a meaningful look with Jake before turning back to level a forced smile at Mark.

“I think it would be nice to meet for coffee sometime,” Josephine said.

“That’s great! Let’s exchange phone numbers.” Mark whipped out his cell phone.

Josephine dug out her own cell which was a recent acquisition and swapped numbers with Mark. Josephine enjoyed herself as they continued to converse over their dinner. She didn’t return to her condo until late in the evening but had trouble going to sleep as doubts about leaving retirement plagued her mind. Josephine looked over the application and resumé that her friends had completed for her before turning it in the next morning. Josephine’s body tensed with nervousness as she drove home. She planned on changing out of her professional attire and into shorts and a blouse so she could go jogging at the beach but as soon as she reached her condo, Alice and Helen came over to visit. Obviously, Alice had been keeping a vigilant watch from her guest bedroom window which offered a perfect view of Josephine’s parking spot.

“How did it go?” Alice asked.

“A clerk took my application and told me they’d call me for an interview if my qualifications were a good fit,” Josephine said.

“The government runs very slowly. I heard it can take weeks or even months before they contact any applicants,” Helen said.

“I don’t know if my nerves can take that,” Josephine said.

“You just need to do something to fully occupy your mind,” Helen suggested. “I would go running with you but I’m afraid I’m out of shape.”

“I think we should work on some jinxes to use on Dale. We’ll break into his condo and set up some surprises for him.” Alice’s eyes gleamed with mischief.

“I think you should try to extend an apple branch to him. See if you can mend fences,” Helen said.

“Extend an olive branch,” Alice corrected.

Helen’s eyes lit up with enthusiasm. “That’s exactly what I think!”

“I think Helen’s right. I’m going to prepare some enchantments as a goodwill gesture. Or maybe I can just use something I’ve already made,” Josephine said. “What do men like and dislike?”

“They’re a bunch of pigs,” Alice said with a moody frown.

“They tend to be lazy,” Helen supplied with a helpful smile.

Josephine snapped her fingers and pointed at Helen with elation. “That’s exactly it! I’ll give him a couple of my cleaning enchantments. They’re advanced and do a thorough job.”

(End of Book excerpt)