

A
Dawn &
Rosie
Adventure



I TOLD YOU

WE'RE BEING
FOLLOWED, DAWN

TITANIA
TEMPEST

I TOLD YOU

We're Being Followed, Dawn

a Dawn & Rosie novelette

**TITANIA
TEMPEST**

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Dawn & Rosie

CHAPTER ONE

Rain spattered at the kitchen windows, rivulets threading down the glass, and Rosie let out a small sigh for the morning's peace as she watched them slide. Dawn had taken the boys down to the common early – chilly weather be damned – and the quiet was almost luxurious after three days of muddy football boots, snack negotiations, and constant motion. Rosie adored her grandsons. She also adored, in this moment, their absence. They had the kind of chaotic energy that could put Labrador puppies to shame, and Rosie found it frankly exhausting. Dawn, infuriatingly, didn't seem bothered in the slightest. She thrived in it – a co-conspirator, right in the thick of things, always somehow two steps ahead.

Rosie let herself enjoy the silence while it lasted.

With a sigh, she turned from the window and reached for the kettle – and her exhale choked into a screech as her hand brushed against a large black spider lurking beside it. She leapt back, wringing her fingers in revulsion, and caught herself on the kitchen table as she glared at it. With her heart pounding, she watched it for a long moment, but it didn't move.

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At last, she howled, “Oh, for God’s sake!”, and marched forward to snatch up the rubber monstrosity. “If I trip over one more bloody spider in this *bloody* house—!”

Cussing magnificently under her breath, she stormed over to the bin and threw it in, then spun on her heel to finish making her tea. With a dreadful scowl, she removed another spider from the mug cupboard. A third from inside the tea canister. She was just lifting a fourth out of the cutlery drawer when she caught a flash of movement outside. Squinting through the drizzle, she spied Nate and Tommy scampering toward the house. They dodged the skeletons and jack-o’-lanterns along the drive with gleeful shouts. A short distance behind them, Dawn traipsed gamely along in their wake.

Rosie’s lips tightened to a thin white line. With the latest spider still clutched in her fist, she turned on a tide of indignant fury to catch them all at the door. The boys tumbled in amidst raucous chatter, drenched from head to toe and flinging mud clumps from their football boots, and burst out laughing when they caught sight of their grandmother waving the lifelike rubber spider.

“Got yourself a new pet, Grandma?” Tommy quipped.

“Blimey, Grandma!” his younger brother, Nate, chimed in with a snort. “Never thought you fancied spiders!”

Rosie spluttered, brandishing it at them, but they dashed past her with wide grins and were out of reach before she could unleash the scolding blistering her tongue. “Coats!” she flung after them as they tore down the hall – and they barely paused to throw them off before disappearing towards the games room. “Bloody kids,” she muttered, stalking over to pick up their soaked hoodies.

“Getting the better of you, are they?” came Dawn’s warm voice from the doorway.

Rosie whirled – ready to lay into her, too, for her part in the spider shenanigans – but faltered to a halt as Dawn looked up from scraping her boots on the mat. Her pink cheeks glowed beneath her dark eyes, and a blue beret, set at a jaunty

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angle and glistening with raindrops, lent her a decidedly scampish air. Entranced, Rosie's heart skipped a beat.

Catching the expression on her face, Dawn straightened slowly and lifted an eyebrow. "Something the matter?"

Rosie realized she was staring. Hiding behind an indignant frown, she clipped, "You really mustn't wear that hat. It suits you entirely too well, and it's very distracting."

Dawn's lips quirked. "Ruined your tirade, have I?"

Rosie marched over to deposit the boys' jackets on the rack, and then, with a grandiose sigh, caught Dawn up in a hug, wet clothes and all. "You have, actually," she accused, leaning back with her arms locked around Dawn's waist. "I was fuming perfectly well until you walked in and ruined it, thank you very much." She narrowed her eyes, but then Dawn's jaunty appearance defeated her, and she smiled. "Also... hello, love."

"Hello, indeed," Dawn returned, grinning. She stole a quick kiss, and then, wiggling free of Rosie's clutches, peeled off her soaked parka. She hooked it behind the door, along with her sodden scarf and beret. "Bit bloody chilly out there – any chance you were making tea?"

Rosie narrowed her eyes as she remembered the cause of her irritation. "Well, I *was*, until I was accosted by yet another giant bloody spider."

She scooped a dry cardigan off the back of the door and held it open. Dawn slipped her arms into the sleeves, chortling, and Rosie settled it across her shoulders from behind.

"Have you found them all yet?"

"I don't even know how many there are!" Rosie retorted, steering her towards the kitchen.

"Well, how many *have* you found?"

"Far too bloody many – you and those damned boys are going to drive me to an early grave!"

Dawn winked sideways. "You're far too young for that, Rose. Plenty of years of torment left."

Rosie groaned wholeheartedly and pushed her on ahead. "You make the tea, dammit. I'm sick of tripping over spiders."

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Stifling her amusement, Dawn obliged, and Rosie made her way to the kitchen table with a sigh. She pulled out one of the stools – and her face darkened to thunder.

“Dawn!” she howled, snatching another spider off the seat and flailing it fiercely. “*Honestly*—!”

“All right!” Dawn said, deftly stepping across to rescue it from Rosie’s clutching fingers. “I’ll get the boys to pick them all up in a minute. Sit there, now, and let me bring you some tea.”

Muttering, Rosie did as she was told, scowling after Dawn as she tossed the spider aside and busied herself with cups and trappings. But at length, as she watched Dawn’s elegant fingers transform the simple task into something mesmerizing, she relaxed, and when Dawn finally placed a steaming cup in front of her, she was smiling again.

Dawn returned her expression with soft affection. She sat down opposite, cradling her own tea, and said, “Sorry, about all the spiders.”

Rosie lifted an eyebrow. “You are *not* – it’s been cause for endless amusement between the three of you rascallions. The novelty really has worn off, though; I’ve long since passed scared – they’re just pissing me off now.”

Dawn’s eyes crinkled. “I know – and that’s even funnier.”

“Just get rid of them, would you?” Rosie huffed. “*Before* Mary shows up to fetch the boys.”

“Yes, dear. What time is she coming, by the way?”

Rosie sipped her tea. “Not soon enough, I should imagine.”

Dawn laughed and got up to chivvy Tommy and Nate.

“She’ll be here by three!” Rosie called after her. As she listened to Dawn’s jaunty footsteps fade deeper into the house, she glanced at the clock, and was pleased to see that the pick-up time was only a few hours away. Only a few more hours until peace, sanity, and no more bloody spiders.

Dawn & Rosie

CHAPTER TWO

By the time Mary pulled up at two minutes to three, the rain had set in properly, and Dawn scooted out with a brolly to meet her. Rosie urged them on from the safety of the doorway, and Mary caught her up in a great, wet hug as she made it to the house.

“Dammit, you’re sopping!” Rosie exclaimed, fending her off.

“Nice to see you too, Mum,” Mary grinned. “Thanks for bringing the brolly out, Dawn.”

“Fat lot of good it did,” Dawn returned, doing her best to shake it out over the step.

“Tea,” Rosie announced, turning for the kitchen. Over her shoulder, she said, “How was the trip?”

“Absolutely fabulous,” Mary replied. “If you get a chance, you really must go and take a gander.”

“France is a little foreign for me, don’t you think?” Rosie said, pouring the tea.

“Cheese, wine, and beautiful scenery, Rose,” Dawn countered. “What’s not to like?”

“It’s all in French,” Rosie reminded her.

“I speak a little French. We’d be fine.”

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“*You’d* be fine. Feel free to venture out there, then.”

Dawn snorted. “Rather stay here with your tea and scones, would you?”

“Do you *have* any scones?” Mary interjected. “I’d kill for one, actually.”

Rosie fixed Dawn with an I-told-you-so expression. “You see – one weekend in France and she’s gasping for proper grub.”

“Hardly,” Mary laughed. “But the last bite I had was on the plane hours ago – I’d eat just about anything at this stage.”

“They’re in the cupboard,” Dawn offered, pointing. “White container with sunflowers.”

“Thanks,” Mary said. She hustled over and fished them out. “Where are the boys?”

Rosie raised an eyebrow. “What boys?”

“Oh, ha, ha.” Mary dug in the fridge for something to dress her scone with but found only a tub of butter. “You don’t have any cream?”

“Sorry,” Rosie snapped, “wasn’t prepared for the Queen visiting today.”

Mary chuckled, amiably slathering her treat, and Rosie hollered into the hall for Tommy and Nate. After a short pause, they tumbled into the kitchen and threw themselves at Mary, talking over each other in their excitement.

Observing the hearty reunion, Rosie leaned over to mutter in Dawn’s ear, “I don’t remember ever being that popular with my own child.”

“Perhaps if you weren’t so prickly...” Dawn elbowed her with a smirk, and Rosie put on an affronted expression. But she leaned against Dawn’s shoulder, content to watch the boys filling their mother in on their escapades and quick-firing a million questions about her trip to France.

“Did you bring us anything, Mum?” Nate gushed, trying to peer into her handbag.

“I did,” Mary laughed, “but your presents are at home.”

“Aww,” Tommy said. “Can we go, then?”

“Are you even ready?” Rosie interjected with a snort.

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The boys exchanged glances, and then scampered to go and fetch their things. In a few minutes, they were back – hastily-packed duffel bags threatening to burst.

“Ready!” Tommy announced, and beside him, Nate bobbed his head in enthusiastic agreement.

“All right, then,” Mary said, downing the last of her tea. “I do need to get home anyway. Hardly had a minute, yet. Cheers, Mum, Dawn. We’ll catch up soon, all right? Thanks for having the boys – oi, say thank you, you lot.”

Tommy and Nate warbled their gratitude and said their goodbyes, and soon, the car was pulling away through the steady rain. From the kitchen window, Rosie watched them go, offering a small wave as they turned out of sight. Dawn slid her arms around Rosie’s waist from behind, and Rosie leaned into her embrace as she stared at the steady stream of rivulets chasing down the glass.

After a moment, she said, “Gosh. Would you listen to that?”

Dawn cocked her head. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Exactly,” Rosie said primly. “Peace and quiet, at last.”

Dawn laughed and spun away. “Not for long, dearheart – best start getting ready, now, or we’re going to be late.”

Rosie turned, narrowing her eyes. “Late for *what*?”

“We’re going to that haunted maze, remember.”

“Oh. Yes. I’d hoped you’d forgotten.”

Dawn smirked. “No such luck. Go on, now, go and have a bath so we can get cracking. Your outfit is hanging in the wardrobe, by the way.”

Rosie glared. “Remembered the costumes, too, did you?”

“Of course,” Dawn said, frogmarching her towards the stairs. “It’s a *Halloween* maze, Rose – dressing up’s half the fun. Hurry up, now.”

“All *right*,” Rosie huffed, dragging her feet as she ascended.

Muttering, she stomped through to the bathroom and roughly hauled the bath curtain aside so she could reach the taps. But she paused with her hand outstretched – for there, squatting by the plug hole, was another infernal spider. Typical – obviously the boys couldn’t even remember where

they'd bloody put them all. Pusing her lips to a thin white line, she scooped it up – and it *twitched*.

For a long, horrible moment, she froze. Then it scrabbled frantically in her fingers, and cold realisation hit. Rosie flung it away with a bloodcurdling screech. The spider landed, skidded, and then skittered haphazardly across the bathroom tiles at an abominable pace. Rosie's shrieking reached fever pitch as she danced on the spot to avoid it, and, with a mighty effort, she flung herself up onto the side of the bathtub, clinging precariously to the curtain for balance.

Dawn came rushing in – eyes wide at the ruckus Rosie was causing – and bolted across to steady her before she fell.

“Jesus, Rose! What the hell is going on?”

Rosie, proving incapable of more than bloodcurdling shrieks, clung to Dawn's shoulder with clawed fingers and frantically pointed as the spider dashed behind the toilet.

Dawn stared at the spot where it disappeared, and finally released a long, shaky breath. “Oh. Oh, I see.” She stood still for a long moment, debating where to begin, and then firmly turned her back on the spider. “Come on, now, Rose – get down from there before you hurt yourself.”

“It's still *there*,” Rosie hissed.

“Yes, but it's hiding. You've scared the living daylights out of the poor thing.”

“You're siding with the bloody *spider*?”

“Down,” Dawn repeated. “Now.”

Trembling violently, Rosie allowed Dawn to help her off the lip of the tub, but she kept a wary eye on the space where the spider had vanished.

“Right, then,” Dawn said when Rosie was firmly back on solid ground. “You stay here and keep an eye on it, and I'll go find a bowl.”

“Are you *mad*!?” Rosie howled. “It's out for *blood*!”

“Fine – *you* go get the bowl, and I'll keep an eye on it. Bring that glass one – and a piece of card or something to fit under it.”

Rosie bolted for the door, and Dawn shook her head with a wry sigh. After a short wait, Rosie reappeared in the doorway

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and held out the requested items, but she refused to re-enter the room. Dawn huffed as she marched over to retrieve them, and then, armed with the bowl and a piece of card – covered in the strange scribbles that passed for art in Tommy and Nate's opinion – she set about coaxing the spider out. It cowered, watching the looming card suspiciously, and then made a dash for it. But Dawn was ready, firmly upturning the bowl over it in one swift motion. Thwarted, it scrabbled at the glass. Rosie shuddered audibly behind her.

Carefully – so as not to injure its legs – Dawn manoeuvred the card under the bowl and lifted the whole lot triumphantly. With a grimace for her uncooperative knees, she hauled herself to her feet, and Rosie reeled backwards as she turned for the door.

“It’s only a house spider,” Dawn scoffed. “Relax, Rose.”

Rosie practically foamed as she backed down the passage. “*Relax*?! I picked it *up*, Dawn! It was in my *hand*. My HAND. I’ll never relax again.”

Dawn gave a snort as she tramped down the stairs, and Rosie followed at a safe distance to supervise the disposal.

“Get the door, would you?” Dawn asked as she reached it.

Gingerly, Rosie skirted her to snatch at the handle, and then whizzed back out of the way. But as Dawn made to drop the critter into the nearest flowerpot, she snapped, “Not there! Take it further away!”

“It’s raining.”

“I’ll be straight back in the house, Dawn, to murder me in my sleep.”

Dawn straightened and arched an eyebrow, but then she scrutinised Rosie’s pinched face and took pity on her. With a resigned sigh, she scooted down the steps into the soggy garden and dropped the spider unceremoniously at the base of the hedge. She returned at a smart pace, dripping wet once more, and shook raindrops from her hair as she regained the shelter of the house.

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Rosie closed the door behind her, and then turned around with a sheepish expression. “Sorry... It really is pissing it down out there. Thanks, though, for saving me from the spider.”

Dawn pushed wet locks out of her face. “Saving the spider from you, more like.”

“Very funny,” Rosie sniffed.

“Go on,” Dawn said with a smile, “go and get ready, now.”

Rosie shook her head. “You first. A hot bath will do you the world of good. That’s the third time today you’ve been drenched.”

Dawn opened her mouth to argue, but then stifled a shiver instead. “All right – but you’d better not make us late.”

Rosie pushed her onward. “Honestly, Dawn. When am I *ever* late?”

Dawn & Rosie

CHAPTER THREE

Dawn marched down the passage an hour and a half later and hammered on the bathroom door. “Rose? You’d better not still be in that bloody bath!”

Splash. “I’m not, Dawn.”

Dawn pinched the bridge of her nose, trying for patience, and muttered, “Bloody déjà vu, this is...” She planted a fist on her hip and put on her sternest voice. “Do I need to remind you what happened last time you were dicking around, and I went without you...?”

There was a flurry of activity behind the door, and then it cracked open to reveal Rosie’s entreating face. “I remember – I remember. I’m out, aren’t I?”

Dawn stepped back, exasperated, and made a grand gesture in the direction of the bedroom. “Well? Hurry up, then.”

Rosie looked her up and down and frowned. “*You’re* still in your bloody dressing gown.”

Dawn folded her arms in warning, and Rosie clutched her towel tighter and scooted. But she dawdled magnificently

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through the process of dressing, and by the time she finally had her outfit on, Dawn had been ready for an age.

“God,” came Rosie’s muffled voice from inside the dressing room, “this is the last time I let you choose a Halloween costume for me! Why the hell did you have to get me something with bloody *wings*?”

She emerged, struggling with the gauzy pair half-hooked over her shoulders, and Dawn watched with amusement from where she perched on the side of the bed. Rosie huffed, fighting with the elastics, and finally looked up with a dark expression. But then she faltered to a standstill with her arms still entangled, staring, and Dawn raised one eyebrow at her from beneath a silver-spangled witch’s hat.

“Need some help, there?”

Rosie swallowed, disarmed by the sight of her exquisitely tasteful witch attire. Dawn swept to her feet, her ruffled black gown billowing around her elegant form, and floated across the room. Taking Rosie gently by the shoulders, she turned her so that she could untangle the mess she’d made, and delicately rearranged the elastics. When the wings were in their proper position, she manoeuvred Rosie to face front again, and – mere inches away from Dawn’s magnetic eyes – Rosie exhaled softly.

Her fingers lingering on Rosie’s waist, Dawn smiled. “I must say... the wings do suit you. You’re a rather fetching Fairy Godmother.” She leaned in, her bright gaze on Rosie’s lips, and Rosie found herself unable to move.

But Dawn spun away at the last second, and Rosie took a bemused step forward at the abrupt lack of resistance. It took her a heartbeat to recover, but when she did, she squared her shoulders and forced frost into her tone. “Bloody witch. No wishes for you, after *that*.”

Dawn laughed, straightening her pointed hat with an air of finality. “C’mon – if we don’t crack on soon, we’re definitely going to be late.”

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At last, they were on their way. With the onset of nightfall, the rain had stopped, but in its wake, a thick wall of fog pressed in, and Rosie nosed the car carefully along the gloomy streets.

“I can’t see a damned thing,” she grumbled, leaning over the steering wheel.

“Should have let me drive.”

“We’re inside a cloud, Dawn. There is no way in hell I’m prepared to go through it at a hundred miles an hour.”

Dawn watched the fog rolling over the bonnet and scoffed. “I wouldn’t drive a hundred miles an hour through *this*, you pillock.”

“I don’t think we should be driving at all, actually,” Rosie replied, slowing the car even further. She nosed onward a little more, but then shook her head and pulled over. “I can’t even see the end of the bonnet, now.”

Dawn checked the satnav. “We’re almost there – we could foot it from here, I reckon.”

Rosie jerked to face her. “In the dark? In the *fog*? Are you *mad*?”

“We’re only about a quarter of a mile away, Rose. Ten-minute walk, tops – and I highly doubt we’ll run into trouble in—”

BANG.

They jolted into silence as something collided with the bumper, and then a large, shaggy shadow loomed in front of the car. It reared up with a guttural growl, and Dawn fumbled for Rosie’s hand.

“Never mind,” she squeaked. “I take that back.”

Hardly breathing, they watched as the murk-shrouded beast felt its way around the vehicle, and Dawn leaned away as it neared her window. A cloud of fog rolled past, blocking it out for an instant, and then a distorted, snarling face leered against the glass, teeth bared in great jaws. Dawn practically jumped onto Rosie’s lap, and the nightmare outside tapped at the window with pointed claws.

Dawn whimpered; Rosie took one look at her pale face, steeled herself, and snapped off her seatbelt. She’d unlocked

her door, opened it, and exploded out onto the street before Dawn's clutching hands could make her stay.

"*Rose!*" Dawn yelped. "Have you lost your stuffing mind?!"

"Wait here," Rosie clipped, shutting Dawn safely inside.

Horrified, Dawn watched as Rosie took two steps away and disappeared into the fog. She squinted through the gloomy dark, desperately trying to pick out Rosie's silhouette, but a wall of grey pressed in around the car.

At her window, the wolfish face oscillated, trying to see into the dim interior, and the incessant tapping continued. Dawn closed her eyes, wondering whether praying was worth a go – but a muffled thump forced her attention back. She risked a peek sideways and saw the ghastly muzzle now squished sideways against the glass at a strange angle, as if not by choice.

A gust of wind cleared a gap in the gloom, and she picked out Rosie's thunderous face beyond – she had the ghoul by the collar and was giving it the tongue-lashing of the century. Hauling the monstrosity clear of the door, she tore the grisly mask off to reveal the wide eyes of a gangly teenage boy beneath, and Dawn scurried out of the car.

".... think you're bloody funny, do you?" Rosie was saying vehemently. "I'll bloody show *you* scary—"

"*Rose!*" Dawn exclaimed, stepping quickly between them to pry Rosie's fist loose from his shaggy fur. "Lay off – he's sorry, aren't you?"

"Yeh!" the youngster panted. He was taller than both of them, but he did his best to duck behind Dawn. "Yeh, I'm sorry – but you parked in the junction, mate. Only wanted to tell you so you didn't get in a accident."

Rosie bridled. "*An accident, you vacuous mongrel.*"

"All right!" Dawn kept herself firmly between them. "He's just trying to help, Rose."

"Scared the dickens out of you," Rosie reminded her, glaring up at the youngster. "That was hardly bloody necessary."

The teen gave an awkward shrug. "Didn't mean to, yeh? Just tryna get your attention."

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“It’s all right,” Dawn said to him. “Thanks – we’ll move the car.”

He nodded, relieved, and Rosie scoffed and tossed his mask back. He caught it and bolted, and then all that remained of his existence was the muffled pounding of footsteps drawing away through the fog.

Dawn turned to Rosie with her hands on her hips. “Poor bugger – you scared the shit out of him, Rose.”

“He scared the shit out of you, first,” Rosie replied with a scowl. “Besides, he had it coming, bloody creeping out of the fog like that.”

Dawn stood stoic for a moment more, but then giggled. “You amaze me, sometimes, you chop. You won’t take on a dinky spider in the bathroom, but a great hulking monster in the night is no problem?”

“Each to their own,” Rosie shrugged. She stalked closer to give Dawn a once-over. “Are you all right?”

Dawn waved her concern away. “I’m fine. Caught me by surprise, that’s all.”

Rosie sighed expansively. “If you couldn’t handle *that*, how are you going to make it all the way through this haunted maze malarkey you’ve signed us up for?”

Dawn looped an arm through hers. “I’ll be all right – I’ve got you to protect me.”

Rosie allowed herself to be dragged back around the car. “Or... we could just call the whole thing off and go home. Nice big cup of tea, evening curled up on the couch...”

“Trick-or-treaters knocking at the door half the night – which, of course, is your favourite thing about Halloween...”

Extricating herself from Dawn’s grip at the driver’s door, Rosie huffed. “Fine. Let me move this bloody car off the road properly, then, and we’ll be on our way. Scout ahead, would you? I might lose it entirely if something else hops onto the bloody bonnet.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

After reparking the vehicle, they meandered arm in arm along the pavement. Ahead, the streetlights blurred into soft lines of yellow light, reflecting in muted shards on the damp tarmac, and the fog pressed close in thick waves.

“Proper spooky, isn’t it?” Dawn said in a hushed voice, wary of disturbing the unnatural silence.

Rosie shouldered against her with a smile. “I don’t know, I kind of... like it. Just you and I and the cold, quiet night.”

“Wow,” Dawn chirped, tucking closer as they walked, “since when are you such a bloody romantic?”

“What can I say,” Rosie replied with an expansive sigh, “you do bring out the worst in me.”

Dawn giggled, and then squinted up through the gloom. “Hey! I think this is the place!”

She tugged Rosie towards a garish orange and yellow sign that flickered against the fog. A bell jangled as they pushed through the door, and then a doorkeeper dressed as Frankenstein’s monster materialised before them.

“Oh, hi!” Dawn gushed. “We have a reservation, please – name of Clermont.”

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The doorkeeper nodded, and then, in a low, halting voice, offered, "Welcome... to the House... of Horrors—"

"I thought this was a maze?" Rosie interrupted.

"Oh... it is." The doorkeeper blinked, slow and deliberate. "May I... take your coats?"

"Thank you," Dawn said, doffing hers and straightening her hat. She turned to help Rosie out of her anorak, which was caught on her wings, and then handed them over.

The doorkeeper waved them onward. "The House of Horrors is... a self-guided tour. Follow the markers... and try not to get... lost."

They drew away, but a whisper followed them. "*If you do, no one will save you.*"

"What did you—" Rosie whirled back, but the lobby was empty. "What the – where did that creep go!?"

"C'mon," Dawn said, tugging her forward.

Rosie dug in her heels. "I don't like this, Dawn."

"Don't be ridiculous – it's all part of the ambience. Let's go and see what's inside."

Still, Rosie refused to budge. "Why are we the only ones here? Doesn't that *scream* suspicious to you?"

Dawn rolled her eyes. "Hardly. I specifically booked us a slot an hour before they open properly, because I know how much you hate crowds."

"Oh." Rosie considered that, and then unglued her feet from the floor. "Just an hour, did you say?"

"That's how long the website said we'll need to go all the way through."

Rosie pursed her lips before sighing in surrender. "All right, fine. I'm sure we'll survive an hour – but if we get murdered in there, I'm going to kill you."

Dawn scoffed and tugged her onwards. Together, they approached the fabric-shrouded entrance, casting suspicious glances at the froth of spiderwebs hanging low enough to make them duck. As they neared, a black curtain opened of its own accord to allow them passage, and when they stepped through, it fell closed behind and plunged them into darkness.

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Dawn clutched tighter at Rosie's arm, making her wince, but she made no move to loosen the pressure. They paused, waiting for their eyes to adjust, and a faint glow brightened slowly at their feet.

Dawn exhaled, looking down at the luminescent arrows. "Oh, good. Those must be the markers."

Rosie glared at them. "Well, here's hoping they lead us to an exit, and not to our doom."

"God, you really are the queen of melodra—"

Dawn choked off with a sharp inhale as a shadow darted at them across the floor. She flung herself into Rosie's arms with a shriek as a giant rat skirted their feet, scurried past, and disappeared into a crack in the wall.

Leaning back to catch Dawn's eye, Rosie allowed herself an amused smirk. "So... spiders, yes – rats, no?"

Dawn disentangled herself. "Rats carry *disease*, Rose."

"*Real* rats," Rosie countered. "I'm quite sure that was a prop."

Dawn squinted dubiously after it and stifled a shudder. "Looked bloody real to me."

They watched the hole in the wall for a moment more, but the rat did not reappear, so they turned their attention back to the pale markers on the floor. Edging along in the direction indicated, they paused often, keeping an eye out for more rats – and anything else that might move. As they progressed, the passageway got narrower, and the smell of damp rose between thick, mossy branches that rustled at their passing. In the spaces between the boughs, red eyes blinked – too quickly to focus upon – and small shadows flickered through the leaves, seeming to keep pace. Somewhere in the distance ahead, metal creaked, interspersed with soft, tortured moans.

"God, this is creepy, isn't it?" Dawn said, delighted.

"Brave now that the rat's gone, are we?" Rosie snapped back, feeling slightly claustrophobic. She glanced back the way they'd come – and a large shape ducked behind the bend at the limit of her vision. Grabbing Dawn's arm, she hissed, "There's something back there!"

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Dawn followed her gaze and waited a beat, but nothing materialised. "There are 'somethings' all over the place, Rose. That's the point."

They watched the passage for a moment more, but nothing jumped out at them, and, eventually, they found courage enough to continue. As they went, the grisly tree branches gradually gave way to overhanging rock slick with slime, and the rough ceiling sloped lower and lower, until Dawn removed her hat and they had to stoop to proceed. The dripping walls pressed in, too, and Rosie's breath came shorter as the feeling of being trapped grew strong.

"I don't like this, Dawn," she whispered, half-turning around towards the more open area they'd come from.

The lack of acid in her tone made Dawn stop. She circled around, and her face creased as she caught sight of Rosie's pale face. Laying a gentle hand on her arm, she gave a sympathetic smile. "Sorry, dove... Do you want to go back?"

Rosie closed her eyes briefly and shook her head. "No, no... I'll be all right. I just... need a second to breathe."

Dawn grimaced. Sheepish, she offered, "If I'd known it had small spaces, I wouldn't have made you come."

"It's not too bad," Rosie said, braver than she felt. "Let's just push through here and then we'll—" She broke off, jerking her head up as movement caught her eye over Dawn's shoulder.

"What?" Dawn asked, turning.

Rosie lowered her voice. "There really is something back there."

"I don't see anything," Dawn said, squinting into the gloom.

They waited again, but again, all was still.

"You're starting to freak me out with that, Rose," Dawn said. "Are you sure you saw something?"

"Well..." Rosie squeezed her eyes shut, opened them again, and stared down the dim passageway. "I suppose it is quite dark in here. Maybe I'm imagining it – to be honest, I feel like my senses are in overdrive."

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Dawn gave a breathless laugh. "Me, too. What say we pick up the pace a little bit?"

Rosie nodded grimly, and Dawn led the way again. She pushed further through the tight squeeze until it suddenly opened up into a large, pitch-dark room. Ahead, unseen machines beeped and whirred, and, cautiously, Dawn pushed through the clutching ferns at the edge. She stepped from rough rock onto rubber matting, turned to offer a hand to help Rosie through, and then they dusted themselves off and tried to make out their surroundings. A fluorescent light flashed on suddenly, blinding them, and Rosie hissed as she shielded her eyes. But slowly, their vision adjusted, and then their surroundings swam back into focus.

Dawn swallowed audibly and edged forward. "Gracious, aren't these props impressive?"

"A little *too* realistic for my tastes," Rosie said acidly. But she followed her towards what appeared to be a hospital bed in the centre of the room, complete with a comatose patient hooked up to all manner of tubes and wires.

Rosie leaned over to get a better look, and quickly pressed her fist to her lips as she gagged. "Oh, God," she groaned, swallowing hard.

"Squeamish, are we?" Dawn giggled, patting her on the back. "It's not real, remember."

Rosie risked another peek. "Perhaps not – but they've done a stuffing excellent job."

The patient's ribcage, held open with a series of hooks, presented a clear view of a beating heart, nestled in with lungs that appeared, for all intents and purposes, to be breathing.

"Gosh, just *look* at the attention to detail!" Dawn exclaimed, fascinated.

"That's disgusting," Rosie replied flatly. "Bloody morbid, you are – can we go, now, please?"

Dawn turned to tease her, but the patient suddenly bolted upright between them, and they shrieked. Rosie shot across the room, plastering herself against the far wall in her bid to escape. Dawn, who'd only stumbled back a step or two,

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grinned at her from across the way, and the patient slowly reclined again.

“Wow,” she chortled, lifting an eyebrow at Rosie. “We’re certainly getting our money’s worth!”

“I can’t believe you *paid* for this!” Rosie flung back, unpeeling herself from alongside a cupboard. “They should bloody pay *us* to be here.”

She skirted the hospital bed, glaring at its occupant, and Dawn jovially looped an arm through hers when she was close enough.

“Onwards, shall we?”

“Absolutely – one bloody inch closer to the exit, at least.”

They stepped towards the next door – but the lights went out. Strangled gasps escaped them, and they froze, clinging to each other. Around them, the dark pressed in, heavy and eerily quiet.

After a moment, Rosie said hoarsely, “Where are the bloody markers? Aren’t they supposed to glow?”

Dawn scanned the floor, finally spotting a faint luminescence several feet away. “There! There’s one by the door.”

Cautiously, they picked their way towards salvation. When they reached it, Dawn felt around for a handle and pulled it open, and above them, the fluorescent light flickered back on. It blinked off again, then on. Off. On. In flashes, it illuminated a long, clinical corridor beyond the rust-red doorframe. Further down, another light also flickered periodically, so that the stretch was more shadow than light – and the clicking sound of its futile efforts to properly ignite echoed into the quiet.

“Great,” Rosie snarked, staring down the creepy passage. “All we need now is the bloody serial killer.”

Dawn gave a delicious shiver. “Let’s hope not.”

Dawn & Rosie

CHAPTER FIVE

Dawn tugged Rosie forward, and they proceeded in fits and starts down the stark hallway, only moving when the light briefly flashed, and they could see. Hospital doors lined either side, and Rosie averted her eyes as shadowy hands pressed against the inside of each glass port they passed. Far-off moans, punctuated by the odd chilling scream, penetrated the quiet, and Dawn covered her nose against the acrid smell of disinfectant. Always, the lights flickered on and off. On and off.

As they passed the last door, a soft sobbing caught Dawn's attention, and she stopped.

"Heavens," she murmured. "Will you listen to that?"

Rosie frowned, eyeing the small window. "That's unnervingly realistic."

As they discussed it, the sobbing quietened, and then a papery voice whispered, "H-hello...?"

A pale face pressed against the glass, and both Dawn and Rosie jumped violently. They stared; though the window was

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frosted, the face appeared to belong to a young woman, and her timid voice came again.

“Is... s-someone there?”

Lips pressed tight, Rosie and Dawn eyed each other.

“P-please... there’s been a terrible mistake... I shouldn’t be in here. Please... help me...”

The voice trailed off in despair, and Dawn narrowed her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she reached for the door handle.

Rosie caught her hand and hissed, “Are you mad?”

“I think there’s really someone in there, Rose,” Dawn whispered back.

“Of course there is! They employ actors at these sorts of things, you know. Leave well enough alone, I say.”

But Dawn shook her head as the soft sobbing resumed behind the door, punctuated by tiny, breathless pleas. “I have to check.”

“Your chivalry will be the death of us both, one of these days...” Rosie said darkly, but she only watched as Dawn reached for the handle again.

Gingerly, Dawn pressed the lever down and then, steeling herself, pulled.

The door didn’t budge.

“Huh. It’s locked.”

“Can’t say I’m devastated by that.”

Dawn frowned – and abruptly reeled backwards as a loud bang struck the other side of the door, followed by an ungodly cackling.

The face leered at the window again, making obscene expressions. “Come in, sweetie, come in... come in – come in and see...”

Glaring at the figure now running its tongue along the inside of the glass between mad fits of laughter, Rosie snipped, “See? Actor. Insane one, at that.”

Dawn straightened her hat with a grimace. “This place really is over the top.”

“You’re the one who made us come,” Rosie said, but then she offered a small smile. “It’s sort of fun, though.”

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“Isn’t it?” Dawn replied with a grin. “Definitely a night we’ll remember.”

“One I’d probably prefer to forget,” Rosie sighed.

She looped her arm through Dawn’s again, and they left the cackling fiend behind. A few steps away, the end of the corridor loomed, demarcated by a large round hatch, and Dawn paused to take in the flickering hall once more.

Her grip tightened on Rosie’s arm. “Rose...”

“What?” Rosie said, turning to look.

At the other end, a silhouette flashed in the doorway, backlit by the fluorescent tube in the patient’s room. Though it was hard to tell at this distance, and with the erratic illumination, it appeared to be a man, standing absolutely still and staring in their direction.

“Who is that?” Dawn hissed.

“I told you something was behind us!” Rosie said grimly.

“Another actor?”

Another flash – and though they hadn’t seen him move, the Man was a few feet closer. He was directly beneath the next tube this time, and the flicker of light outlined a well-cut grey waistcoat, dark trousers, and a baker boy cap that threw his face into shadow.

“He’s dressed awfully normally,” Rosie disagreed, squinting. “Another patron, maybe?”

Dawn glanced at her watch and shook her head dubiously. “Can’t be. They don’t open to the general public for another half an hour...”

“Perhaps he also has an early booking? We have been dawdling a bit...”

Flash. The Man was closer again.

“I don’t know.” Dawn backed up a little. “Let’s go, shall we?”

“Oil!” Rosie shouted suddenly – making Dawn jump. “What the hell are you doing, creeping around like that?”

The Man didn’t answer, and the corridor plunged into darkness once more.

“Rose...” Dawn whispered, almost a plea. She tugged at Rosie’s gauzy sleeve. “C’mon...”

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The light flashed, and the Man had moved another couple of steps towards them in perfect silence. He stood with his hands thrust deeply into his pockets, watching them.

“Sod it,” Rosie snapped, turning for the heavy door behind them. She wrenched it open, hauled Dawn through, and heaved it shut. “Let’s shake a leg, Dawn – I wouldn’t mind putting some distance between us and that weirdo.”

“No arguments here,” Dawn agreed.

Rosie eyed the empty room ahead suspiciously, noted that these lights, at least, appeared to be in good working order, and judged it safe enough to proceed. They picked up their pace, keeping an ear on the door behind them, and made it halfway across before the floor dropped out from under them with a thunderous crack. Dawn screamed, and Rosie lunged for her as the tiles fell away, dropping hundreds of feet towards a nighttime cityscape below. Suddenly, they were suspended in midair, gaping down at a gut-wrenching plunge. Terrified of heights and utterly unprepared for the abrupt vertigo, Dawn choked on a sob and shut her eyes.

Rosie swept her into her arms. “It’s all right – it’s all right – it’s not real,” she murmured against her ear. “The floor’s a screen – it’s just an illusion. We’re still standing on solid ground.”

Dawn shook with dread. “It’s... too much, Rose – I can’t...”

“Bloody bastards – this sort of bollocks should come with a warning,” Rosie growled, hugging her tight. “Keep your eyes shut, all right? I’ll lead you across.”

Trembling, Dawn managed a nod, and Rosie guided her halting steps the rest of the way. At last, they reached the next door, and the ‘tiles’ slowly swirled back up, resettling into a complete floor behind them.

“You can look, now,” Rosie said. “The *view* is gone.”

Dawn risked a peek, and then her breath rushed out as she reached for the wall to steady herself. “God... I think I might need to sit down...”

Rosie squeezed her shoulders. “I know your legs are jelly, but there’s still the issue of that... man.”

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“Right,” Dawn said, inhaling deeply. “Right you are – let’s press on... I don’t know about you, but I think I’ve had just about enough of this House of bloody Horrors.”

Rosie frowned. “I hope you’re cured of your bloody thrill-seeking penchant, now. Next year we’re staying *in* – lights off, doorbell disconnected.”

“Sounds magical,” Dawn said with a small smile. “Too bad I didn’t listen to you in the first place.”

Rosie huffed. “Too bad that you *never* bloody listen to me.”

Dawn & Rosie

CHAPTER SIX

Bolstering themselves with bickering and bravado, they went through the next door to the room beyond, and then paused to take stock. Inside, a large circus ring dominated the floor, and red-and-white drapery hung from the ceiling, emulating the inside of a tent. Empty, rough-fenced stalls lined the outskirts, and the smell of sawdust, caramelised sugar, and roasted peanuts floated in the still air.

“Oh-ho!” Dawn grinned, rubbing her hands together. “Care to guess what this one’s all about...?”

Rosie narrowed her eyes as the stage curtain opposite shifted. “I don’t need to guess.”

Soft, chittering laughter preceded the clown’s entrance, and then its polka-dotted body followed, crawling upside down with jerky, irregular movements that set its oversized shoes to clunking. At the edge of the ring, it paused, slowly righted itself, and then crouched with its head tilted at an alarming angle as it considered them. The rainbow frizz wig bobbed as the breathless chortling continued, and, without

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breaking eye contact, it began to scrape at the packed sawdust at its feet.

“Well?” Dawn said to Rosie. “Do we go around it?”

“Give it a sec,” Rosie replied, watching it suspiciously. “It’s up to something.”

The hole got bigger, the laughter got louder, and then, with an explosion of sawdust and grit, the clown hauled out a large axe. It let out an unhinged holler of triumph and ran at them, manically brandishing the weapon.

Dawn recoiled despite herself, but Rosie stood stoic in the face of its charge, and it skidded to a halt mere inches in front of her, laughing and screeching and waving the axe in her face. With an expression of extreme disapproval, she glared at it, and, by degrees, its gyrating grew less enthusiastic. Eventually, the axe drooped, and then the clown hesitated as if debating what to do.

Cold as ice, Rosie inquired, “Well?”

The clown chittered a little more – uncertainly, now – and then, with a shrug, turned on the heel of its oversized shoe, shouldered the axe, and retreated back the way it had come.

When it had disappeared beyond the curtain, Dawn snorted a laugh and slow-clapped for Rosie’s nerve. “Wow, Rose, that was... inspiring.”

Rosie scoffed. “Luckily, I’ve never been scared of clowns. I find them annoying, at best. Besides, I’m quite confident that this place’s insurance does *not* cover actually axe-murdering a patron.”

Dawn’s grin widened. “Still, in the moment, that was very impressive. That thing was creepy as hell – even I ducked when it bolted at us, and I’m not particularly afraid of clowns, either.”

Rosie adjusted her wings and harrumphed. “How many more bloody rooms do we have to go through, do you think?”

“I’m sure we must be nearly at the end now,” Dawn replied.

“I certainly hope so. I feel like we’ve been stuck in here for a bloody lifetime.”

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They dusted their costumes down – because sawdust motes still hung in the air after the clown's violent excavation – and turned towards the next marker on the far wall.

Behind them, the door creaked open.

They jolted around, stiffening as the Man stepped through. He stopped as he caught sight of them, and then leaned effortlessly back against the doorframe with his hands still buried in his pockets.

“What do you *want*?” Rosie yelled, trying to make out his face beneath the low-slung cap.

“Come on, Rose,” Dawn said under her breath, unnerved by his lack of reaction.

Rosie hesitated for a second, but then pushed Dawn on ahead and matched her smart pace across the remainder of the room. They hurried through the far door, shut it firmly behind them, and then stumbled to a halt. Ahead, there were three doors – and the markers pointed to all of them.

“Well, shit,” Dawn muttered. “Now what?”

“No time to mull it over,” Rosie said, heading sharply for the one on the right. “At least that freak will have to guess which one we went through.”

Silent, Dawn followed her in and pulled the door shut behind them.

“Right,” Rosie said primly. “What have we got this time?”

“I’m not sure,” Dawn said, edging forward to investigate what looked like a small printing press. Newspapers of all kinds were strewn about, and she bent down to pick one up. “Well. That’s disconcerting...”

“What is it?” Rosie asked, coming to see.

Dawn held up the paper. “It’s... us.”

“What?” Rosie snatched it, staring at their picture. Her eyes widened as she read the headline. “Is this some kind of sick joke? Where on earth did they get this photo from...?” Slowly, she read aloud the first few lines of the article: “Two Wilmslow residents, Rosie Bishop, sixty-three, and Dawn Clermont, sixty-four, have been declared missing after a mishap at a Haunted House attraction on the evening of the

thirty-first of October. Police have released an image of a suspect wanted in connection with the case and are appealing to—” Rosie turned the page, broke off, and paled.

In stark ink, the shadowed visage of the Man leered.

“What the hell...” Dawn croaked. Staring at the picture, she took the paper back from Rosie’s limp hands, scanned the rest of the article, and then said, “Look, Rose...”

Rosie’s gaze followed her finger as she pointed out the date, and then she bent to pick up another paper, and another, and another. All of them boasted the same front-page article, the same picture, and the same date.

Tomorrow.

Dawn let the paper she was holding flutter to the floor. “Let’s get out of here – this is a bit too weird.”

“Bloody right,” Rosie said, tossing her collection of newspapers aside. She cast about the room, and then stalked over and grabbed a chair that sat to one side.

“What are you doing with that?” Dawn asked, eyeing it as she dragged it over.

Rosie tucked it under the door handle, pinning the door shut, and then heaved a box of newspapers onto the seat to give the obstruction some weight. Next, she retrieved a broom she’d spied leaning against the wall in one corner, eyed a crook in the press where two metal rods met, and then pushed the broom head through. She wedged it securely in the gap, leaned on the handle until the head snapped off, and then examined the remaining long, pointed stick with a grim expression.

“I don’t know what this place is playing at,” she said, testing the weapon’s heft, “but if we’re going down, it won’t be without a fight. Here.”

Dawn’s eyes widened as Rosie handed her the sharpened broomstick, and then Rosie turned away to find something else that might be useful. On the far side of the printing press, she found a small pile of print rollers, and, picking one up, she brandished it. It was a little longer than a rolling pin, and

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about twice as heavy, and she decided it would do. For good measure, she grabbed another for her other hand.

"Right," she said brusquely. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Dawn clutched her broomstick and nodded, following her as she stalked over to the next door. Rosie tucked one roller under her arm, turned the handle and pulled.

Nothing happened. Frowning, she pushed instead.

"What's the matter?" Dawn asked from behind her.

Rosie's scowl deepened. "Door's locked."

Dawn paled, and they turned to look at the door Rosie had previously barricaded.

"It appears the only way out is back through there," Rosie said darkly.

"But... the Man is that way."

"I don't see we have any choice."

Dawn released a shaky breath. "You know, this evening was supposed to be *fun*."

"We'll laugh about it when we get home," Rosie promised, reaching for her hand to give it a reassuring squeeze. "Right now, though, let's get that door open and—"

The handle rattled, and she broke off. It dipped downward, but was thwarted by the chair, and they held their breath as it slowly lifted back up again. A tense moment passed, and then, from the other side, a polite knock echoed.

Rosie pursed her lips. "He... *knocked?*"

Beside her, Dawn squared her shoulders. "Well... might as well let him in."

"Might as well," Rosie agreed, settling the rollers in her grip like a pair of nunchucks. "You get the chair, and I'll hold the line here in case he rushes us."

Dawn eyeballed her, taking in the steely set of her spine, and then nodded. She tiptoed over to the chair, set her broomstick down, and then readied herself to pull it out of the way. Over her shoulder, she caught Rosie's eye, and Rosie gave a curt nod.

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With a deep breath, Dawn heaved the barricade across and then snatched up her broomstick and scuttled to the side. But the door remained closed, and Rosie curled her lip.

“Well?” she snarled loudly. “What are you waiting for? Come in, you slimy little git!”

They waited a beat, but all was quiet. The handle stayed stubbornly still.

“Sod it,” Rosie exclaimed, storming forward. “I’m far too old for this shit!”

She hauled the door open with a feral yell and then, with Dawn right behind her, burst into the small hall beyond. They flailed their makeshift weapons wildly, swinging in every direction, but didn’t make contact with anything substantial. At last, they paused, breathing hard, and looked suspiciously around the empty space.

“Where’d he go?” Dawn gasped, leaning on her broomstick.

“No clue,” Rosie panted. “Quick, pick a door before he comes back.”

“Right—wait! I’ve lost my hat!”

“Are you stuffing kidding me?” Rosie exclaimed as Dawn bolted back into the print room. “Leave it, damn you!”

But she was back in half a heartbeat, her sparkly witch hat jammed firmly down over her head, and she opened the middle door before Rosie could offer any further condemnation.

“Come on!” Dawn urged after peeking through to make sure the coast was clear. “We haven’t got all day!”

“Says the woman who stopped in the middle of running from a serial killer to fetch her bloody *hat*!” Rosie yowled as she dashed through.

The room beyond was a corridor, too – dimly lit and littered with strange, torturous devices – and they hotfooted along it as fast as their heaving chests would allow them.

“God,” Dawn gasped as they ran, “when we get out... of here... remind me to... start exercising... again.”

“No time... like... the present,” Rosie shot back.

The end of the hallway loomed, along with an extremely welcome EXIT sign, and Dawn swallowed a sob of relief as

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they drew near. They ducked around hanging chains and dodged distorted hooks that protruded from the walls – until Rosie's wings caught on one and yanked her right off her feet. Dawn skidded to a stop, spinning back to rescue her.

“Stay still, Rose,” she admonished as Rosie tried to get up. “I can't get it loose if you're squirming!”

“Oh!” Rosie cried, staring back down the corridor as their nemesis made another appearance at the far end. “Oh, God – hurry up, Dawn – he's back!”

“Hang on – hang on – almost... Ah – got it!”

Dawn pulled her to her feet, and they resumed their mad dash towards the exit sign. As they reached it, Rosie dived for the door handle – and bruised her shoulder when she gave the door a shove and it didn't budge. She cussed, squeezing the sore point with clawed fingers, and Dawn stumbled to a halt beside her.

“It's not locked, Rose,” she said, eyes wide with denial. “It's not...”

Grim, Rosie turned her back to it and squared up next to Dawn, rollers raised. With an unhappy gasp, Dawn turned too, and her white knuckles stood out starkly against the dark wood of the broomstick.

Down the hall, behind the swinging chains and contorted hooks, the Man paused to take their measure.

Dawn & Rosie

CHAPTER SEVEN

This time, the Man's approach was purposeful. He didn't play at stillness, instead moving with smooth, measured strides, and, when he was about halfway down, he finally took his hands out of his pockets. In one, he held a knife, and in the other, a length of chain – and beneath the sweep of his cap's shadow, a strange, frightening smile tightened his lips.

Shoulder to shoulder, Dawn and Rosie watched him come.

"I just want you to know, Rose," Dawn whispered bleakly, not dropping her gaze from the Man for an instant, "that I'm grateful for the time we've had – and especially for the bit after our reunion. I never expected things to happen between us the way they did, but it's been heaven."

Rosie gritted her teeth. "You sound like you've given up on us."

"Well, in case you haven't quite noticed, there's a psychopath bearing down on us with a knife – and we're really just two old ladies, you know."

"I'm offended by that," Rosie clipped.

Dawn managed a grim smile. "Of course you are."

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“Shut up, now, and let me concentrate.”

The Man was getting closer, and Rosie tightened her grip on her makeshift weapons. When he was only a few strides away, a small whimper escaped Dawn, and Rosie stepped in front of her. She set her stance and sent up a quick, silent prayer to anything that might be out there – and the EXIT door cracked open behind them. Suddenly, Dawn was hauling her backwards, and they tumbled through the doorway into garish light beyond. Dawn kicked the door shut with her foot, and then dragged herself up to throw her weight against it, and Rosie rolled over to lie against the base as Dawn’s fingers scrabbled for the lock. It clicked, and then Dawn flopped down onto her bottom beside Rosie. They stared, open-mouthed, as they realised they were back in the entrance lobby.

“Holy shit...” Dawn gasped. “We made it out!”

Rosie shifted to sit upright with a hand pressed over her thundering heart. “How in the hell did you get the door open?”

“I... didn’t,” Dawn said with a bemused shake of her head. “It opened by itself.”

“Well, I’m stuffing glad you noticed. Christ, that was a close call.”

“Sorry,” Dawn replied sheepishly. “That’s the last Halloween activity I sign us up for, I promise.”

“That’s the last *any* activity you sign us up for,” Rosie corrected. She got to her feet with a groan, and then reached out a hand to help Dawn up, too. “Have you forgotten we’re sixty-odd? We’re *supposed* to be slowing down, not running from bloody serial killers!”

Dawn grinned and fixed her hat. “Don’t be ridiculous – if we slowed down, you’d die of boredom.”

Rosie rolled her eyes. “Doesn’t mean you have to bloody try and do me in with these wild shenanigans. Come on, now, let’s find our way out of here – I could use a stiff drink.”

“Ooo! There’s a place not far from here that does the *best* Halloween cocktails!”

“No,” Rosie snapped. “Absolutely bloody not. We’re going *home*.”

“Aww, c’mon, Rose, the night is still—oh. Hi, again.”

Rosie looked up as Dawn shifted her attention midsentence. Frankenstein’s monstrous doorkeeper had reappeared and was shuffling towards them.

“Ah, here... you are,” the doorkeeper said, in the same low, halting tone as before. “Pleased to see... you found your way. I trust you... enjoyed yourselves?”

Rosie puffed up like an angry hen. “*Enjoyed* ourselves? We nearly *died* in there!”

Dawn put her hands on her hips. “Quite – and who the hell was that strange man in there? Did you *know* he was stalking us through?”

“Strange man...?” The doorkeeper’s gaze lifted above their heads to the door behind them. Slowly, it creaked open.

Dawn and Rosie recoiled as the Man stepped through. Whistling softly under his breath, he walked towards them – and then past them – and winked.

But Rosie caught him by his fancy waistcoat lapels and hauled him against the wall.

As she held him pinned, Dawn loomed in front of him with her pointed finger nearly up his nose. “Think you’re bloody funny, do you?! You’ve got some bloody explaining to do!”

Wide-eyed, the Man held up his hands and tried for an appeasing smile. “Whoa! It’s all part of the experience, Ma’am – I’m just an actor!”

“Yes,” the doorkeeper agreed quickly, alarmed enough to drop the put-upon spooky tone. “We do our best to give our patrons an unforgettable time.”

“Unforgettable is bloody right,” Rosie snarled.

Dawn eyed them both suspiciously, but then cracked a grin and reached for Rosie’s arm. “Well, good show. Let the poor boy down, Rose.”

Grumbling, Rosie obliged, and the Man straightened his waistcoat and cautiously cleared his throat.

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"For what it's worth," he offered sheepishly, "you handled yourselves the absolute best out of anyone I've ever seen."

"Course we did," Rosie scoffed. "We've been around the block a time or two – take more than a little twerp like you to do us in."

"No arguments here," the Man replied quickly. "I saw you come flying through the door with those print rollers – you're one scary old lady."

Rosie's spine stiffened. Her voice dropped low and dangerous. "*What...* did you call me...?"

"Run, lad," Dawn advised, raising her eyebrows in amusement. "Run, while you still can."

The Man risked one more peek at Rosie's stormy visage and bolted; in his wake, the doorkeeper turned back to them with a mollifying smile.

"Sorry about Nigel. He's not very tactful, sometimes. Great actor, though."

"*Nigel?*" Rosie spluttered, deflating. "Your serial-killer-psychopath is named... *Nigel*?"

Dawn fell about laughing. "Honestly, you should give him a codename – something a *little* bit more scary."

The doorkeeper cracked a grin, then, and the young woman behind all the makeup was suddenly obvious. "It does sound a bit ridiculous, I'll give you that."

She turned to the reception desk, fiddled with a laptop, and then presented them with an orange-and-black USB stick. "Here – this is the video footage of your experience, as a souvenir. I hope you enjoyed being scared out of your wits."

"House of Horrors certainly lived up to its name," Rosie allowed darkly.

"It did," Dawn grinned. "Thanks – we had a great time."

"We didn't, Dawn."

"Shut up, Rose, before they throw something else at us."

Dawn winked at the doorkeeper, and then chivvied Rosie along towards the exit. Donning their coats by the door, they burst out into the crisp night air, and Dawn elbowed Rosie with a devilish grin.

“Wasn’t that fun?”

Rosie set her jaw and glared at a troop of trick-or-treaters ambling past. “No.”

“Well, all’s well that ends well,” Dawn sighed happily, watching the group of kids give Rosie a wide berth. “How about that cocktail? The bar’s just around the corner...”

Rosie narrowed her eyes, but then glanced up at the now-clear sky, brimming with stars. Over the course of their ordeal, the fog had dispersed, and a stiff breeze nipped playfully at their clothing. Across the way, the warm glow of streetlights rivalled the bright silver of moonlight, and Rosie’s face softened as she took in the beautiful evening.

“Why not,” she said, suddenly feeling benevolent. “How much more trouble can we possibly find in one evening?”

Dawn grinned, her eyes sparkling with mischief beneath her star-spangled hat. “Is that a question, or a challenge?”

Rosie smiled. “Come here, you fool. Did I tell you how beautiful you look this evening?”

“No,” Dawn pouted. “You’ve been terribly slack.”

Rosie’s arms encircled her waist. “Well, you do – and you are. You make a stunning witch, and I’m really rather glad the serial killer didn’t get you.”

Dawn dropped her pretend sulk and smiled, too. “I’m glad he didn’t get you, either. I don’t quite know what I’d do without you.”

She leaned in to press her lips against Rosie’s, slow and sweet, and Rosie pulled her closer. Dawn let her hands rove up into Rosie’s hair, and they melted into the kiss for a lingering moment. Then, approaching footsteps doused the romance, and Rosie was quick to step away to an innocuous distance as another gang of youngsters wandered around the corner.

“Oh, lush!” one crowed as the group spied them. “It’s the fairy from Shrek Two!”

“And McGonagall!” another chirped.

“Nah, mate,” a third disagreed, “that one en’t old enough.”

“Old enough to be your granny, though.”

I TOLD YOU WE'RE BEING FOLLOWED, DAWN

Shouldering each other and laughing, they strolled past, and Rosie rolled her eyes in their wake. When they'd wandered off down a side street, Dawn turned to Rosie and held out her hand.

“Shall we?” she smiled, inclining her head in the direction of the cocktail bar.

Rosie sighed in surrender. “If we must.”

“I’m going to order a Brain Haemorrhage,” Dawn said conversationally as she tucked up close against Rosie’s side.

Rosie slid an arm around her waist. “How do you even *know* that’s a cocktail?”

“I know a lot of useful things about Halloween, Rose. It’s my favourite holiday. Well, next to Christmas...”

“*Please* tell me you’re not already planning things for bloody Christmas.”

“Of course not,” Dawn scoffed. “It’s only Halloween *today*. I’ll start on Christmas plans tomorrow.”

Rosie’s hearty groan echoed along the empty street, chased by the tinkling of Dawn’s impish laughter.

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