

Chapter One: Adam

The wards were down. That was how he knew, really knew, that she was dead.

The plastic flamingos and homemade wind chimes remained, but the warmth of Sue's presence, the thing that said she'd always be there for him, that Adam had a home here, was gone.

Still, the lights were on and a television buzzed somewhere inside the trailer.

Someone was home.

Adam tasted the rain on his lips. He'd driven as fast as he could. The adrenaline that had flooded him when he'd torn out of Denver had long faded.

He'd left without a word, leaving his mom and Bobby to mourn Bobby's wife, Annie, and likely question Adam's sanity again.

Now too much gas station coffee buzzed in his veins. He should eat. But first, he had to know the details. And he had to know who was living in Sue's trailer.

He took the steps in twos, raised his fist to pound on the door, but it swung open before he could knock.

Jodi.

Adam's cousin was twenty-one, just under six feet, and pissy. They'd never gotten along.

Her black and purple hair was pulled into pigtails. It contrasted with the pale, thick foundation she wore to mask her pimples and acne scars. Or maybe they were crystal craters, meth sores. Either way, the sight of her made Adam glad he'd outgrown the goth look.

"What?" she demanded.

Behind her, a television flickered and boomed with some cop show. Adam's relatives probably thought it good research for getting away with crime.

“I’m here for my things,” he said.

“You don’t have any things here,” Jodi spat.

Adam could almost hear the twang of a banjo in her drawl.

“I have clothes. Books,” he argued.

“All gone,” Jodi said with a dismissive shrug.

“Where did they go?” Adam demanded.

He caught a whiff of something nasty when he tried to push past her, like cat urine mixed with nail polish, but she stuck her booted foot against the door.

“Mom took everything to town,” Jodi said. “Sold or pawned it.”

Adam clenched his fists.

“Sue’s rings? My clothes?”

“*Everything*,” Jodi stressed.

Adam took a breath, let it out. He didn’t trust Jodi, and he trusted her mother, Noreen, less. They were liars and cons. Sue had hated them both.

“You’re lying,” he said. “Let me in.”

“No.”

“What about Spider?”

“Who?”

“Sue’s cat. Where is he?”

“That’s a dumb name for a cat,” Jodi muttered. “There wasn’t a cat.”

Adam squeezed his eyes shut. Noreen and Jodi hadn’t even cared enough about Sue to know about Spider. He would take it as a blessing. Who knows what they would have done to the poor thing? Still, there was that smell.

“There had to be,” Adam said. “He was old. He didn’t go out.”

“No cat. No books. No clothes.”

“Will you at least tell me what happened to Sue?” he asked.

“Heart attack. She was old. It happens. Go cry about it somewhere else.”

Jodi slammed the door in Adam’s face.

He sighed. He had a key. He could try to force his way inside, and—what, physically fight off Jodi and her mom? The thing was, he didn’t doubt that Noreen would have sold everything the moment Sue passed.

Noreen was Sue’s daughter, so technically a cousin, but she was more like an aunt in age. She was perpetually broke and by Sue’s account, addicted to any number of things, which probably explained the smell. Her habit was worth more than anything to her.

It was dark. Adam looked across the trailer park. He didn’t have anything here. He didn’t really know anyone either, not well enough to ask for a place to stay. He could look for Spider, not that the cat would come. Spider had only loved Sue. And yet he’d shown up in Denver, warning Adam that something was wrong before disappearing like he’d never been there.

Adam gave one of the porch posts a kick and stalked back to his car.

Climbing in, he laid his forehead on the Cutlass’s steering wheel.

Noreen and Jodi.

Sue had kept her daughter and granddaughter at a distance. She’d hated their willful ignorance, the constant begging for money she didn’t have, and the visits from the sheriff’s deputies asking Sue and Adam if they’d been in contact. Sue hadn’t even invited them to Christmas, and Adam suspected she’d been shielding him from them.

Sometimes Adam thought being gay was a blessing. It kept him from being like his father's extended family, like most of the Binders, just like having magic had kept him from being like his mother and brother.

Noreen and Jodi would lose their minds to know Adam was dating a Mexican cop. He couldn't decide which part of Vic—Mexican, bi, or cop—they'd take more offense at.

"Dammit," Adam said, throwing his head back against the seat's head rest.

He'd left Denver without a note, without calling Vic or explaining. He'd driven straight to Guthrie like his ass was on fire.

Adam unlocked his phone, started to text or call, but he was still seething. The red in his chest was a nice contrast to the deep black and purple, the heavy surety that Sue was gone.

He didn't want to be an emotional wreck when he talked to Vic. He wasn't ready to go back to Denver, not until he found out what had happened to her, if it really had been a heart attack. Then there was Spider, poor old cat. Would he have come to Adam if magic weren't involved? Was it just concern for his mistress or something worse?

Adam squeezed his eyes shut and opened them when cold filled the air, sweeping over the car like a sleet storm. The scent of rotten blackberries and battery acid surged.

He knew this magic, knew its greasy flavor, its cloying, clinging stench.

"No," Adam said, casting about for the source.

The power pulsed once, quick. The lights across the trailer park went out. Adam opened the Cutlass's door and was halfway out when Sue's trailer exploded.

The heat washed over him. Glass pelted the other trailers as every window blew. Smoke, black and noxious, bloomed into the air. The fire lit the night.

Adam choked, swallowed hard on the damp air, and ran for the burning trailer.

“Jodi!” he shouted. “Noreen!”

He’d almost reached the porch when a second blast went off. Adam threw up his arms, put his hands in front of his face, and felt his magic rise as it tried to shield him. The hair on the back of his hands singed.

The chemical smell of the burning trailer grew thick and acrid as the rain sizzled against the flames.

Adam circled, trying to find a way in. The trailer had burst open. Flames licked at the corner of the roof where Sue’s bedroom had been.

The front door was his only option. Adam pulled his jacket over his head, gathered what magic he had, hoping it could help, and jumped inside.

The fire was everywhere, but it hadn’t yet filled the living room. The television, inexplicably, remained lit. He didn’t see anyone.

“Jodi!” he screamed.

No answer. Adam’s heart sank and pounded at the same time.

“Noreen!”

Adam choked on the smoke. It sent a wave of dizziness through him. He pressed his shirt sleeve to his mouth, breathed through that, and kept his jacket over his head.

There, some movement in the corner.

Adam kicked the coffee table aside.

Noreen lay beneath a blanket, one of Sue’s crocheted afghans. She wasn’t moving, but she took a wheezing breath when Adam pulled at her arm. He lifted her as much as he could.

“Jodi!” Adam shouted.

Noreen stirred at her daughter’s name. She staggered to her knees with Adam’s help.

He didn't know if she was high, drunk, or just overwhelmed by the fumes.

"Come on!" Adam shouted, pulling her to her feet.

Together they staggered to the door, him coughing, Noreen wheezing.

He wasn't going to make it. He was going to pass out.

A shadow filled the doorway, a man wreathed in leather straps and a faded black hoodie.

Adam couldn't make out his face through the smoke that filled the room. He held a charred skull in his open palm. Frost coated it despite the fire and the heat.

"Who are you?" Adam tried to shout, though it came out choked.

The figure didn't answer, but Adam knew. This was him, the man he'd been hunting.

Whatever he was, terrible as he was, he emitted a cold that pushed the heat back.

Adam forced himself to carry Noreen toward him, away from the licking flames and rising smoke.

They were almost to the figure. Adam spied two eyes, blue like ice, inside the hood.

Adam would knock him aside if he had to.

The figure vanished as Adam stumbled into him.

Carrying Noreen, Adam fell out the door and into the rain, lungs fighting for clearer air.

He cast about, looking for the figure who'd blown up the trailer. The dark druid, the warlock who might be his father.