

## FOUR

The gym I'd been directed to was housed in a surprisingly modest-looking building. I wasn't sure what I'd expected. It wasn't as though Callum had been super keen on explaining himself, beyond the basics of his decidedly half-baked plan.

"It's the ideal cover," he'd said. "You have an overprotective mother. Overprotective mothers love enrolling their daughters in women's self-defense classes."

I looked him up and down very deliberately. "And what exactly are *you* going to be doing, pray tell, in a women's self-defense class?" "Playing the bad guy, obviously," he informed me cheerfully. "Otherwise known as the teacher's assistant."

I gave him another skeptical once-over, really taking my time with this one. "You."

To my satisfaction, Callum's cheeks pinked very slightly. Score one, Zeng. "Hey now," he protested. "I'll have you know that I've thrown some punches in my time!"

"I'm sure you have," I told him, in a tone that I hoped conveyed that I absolutely did not believe that he had. "I still don't see what the point of this is. You may have gotten into your share of brawls in locker rooms or whatever it is that happens behind closed doors in fancy varsity fencing clubs, but I've never so much as thrown a punch. Also, I sprained my ankle on, like, day two of Coach O'Malley's stupid

wrestling unit in junior year PE, so you can imagine how well literally any kind of physical confrontation is going to go for me.”

“Ah, cheer up, squishy wizard.” Callum patted me gently on my—decidedly meager—biceps. “It’s only a three-month after-school course. That’s plenty of time to solve a murder.”

“Squishy wizard?”

“Yeah,” he said. “You know, like they talk about on gaming forums and stuff like *TV Tropes*? All those famous fictional wizards in games and movies who are super weak and easily defeated in hand-to-hand combat. Like you. Squishy.”

I scowled at him. “Well, I’m not a movie trope, and no woman ever learned actual useful self-defense in three months. Especially no woman with zero athleticism to speak of in the first place.”

“You might be right,” agreed Callum, gamely enough, “but over-protective mothers rarely see it that way.”

The thing was, Callum was right. My parents—my mother especially—ate Callum’s terrible, half-baked plan right up. “Well, I was wondering when you’d finally take an interest in your own physical well-being!” Mom preened. “I keep telling you, Tabatha, working up a sweat in the gym is far healthier for a young woman than spending all that time hunched over desks in occult workrooms doing Lord knows what all day. Besides, this whole murder business has everyone worried about safety after dark. I’ll feel better, knowing you can protect yourself.”

I bit my tongue on what I actually wanted to tell my mother, which was that learning how to jab some dude in the eye and kick him in the crotch was hardly going to protect me from a rampaging sorcerer who’d magically drawn and quartered the patriarch of the most powerful occult family on the East Coast. After all, the last thing I needed was my mother walking back her approval of my new fake

hobby. My tentative murder-solving truce with Callum depended on that approval.

Tentative murder-solving truce aside, I wasn't wild about this whole self-defense thing. I'd never been in a physical confrontation in my entire life, and I certainly didn't intend to start now. I wasn't sure what to expect when I walked through the sensible revolving doors of the redbrick gymnasium and stepped out onto the great big basketball-slash-volleyball-slash-whatever-else-they-played-here court. The whole place smelled like socks and basketball rubber. I wrinkled my nose.

True to his word, Callum had already arrived. It took me only a moment to pick him out among the nervous-looking gaggle of girls in their sweats, huddled in a corner of the Ambiguous Sportsball Court, watching the girls with his hands in the pockets of his varsity hoodie. I made a beeline for him, ignoring the curious—and possibly speculative—looks from the other girls on the court.

“What now?” I asked him, low voiced.

He blinked a few times, as if surprised by the question. “What do you mean? We take class, of course.”

“Class!” I didn't like that answer at all.

“Calm down, squishy wizard, I'll make sure I'm partnered off with you so we can start chatting murder suspects during drills. You won't even have to interact with all the other no-doubt-terrifying ninety-pound teenage girls here, I promise.”

“I thought this was just supposed to be a cover,” I hissed. “I didn't think you were actually going to make me take a women's self-defense class!”

“Not much of a cover if it gets blown as soon as your mom spends five minutes on Google, is it?” observed Callum, sounding infuriatingly sensible. “Relax. We'll still have plenty of time to play Nancy

Drew. All we have to do is get through an hour, and then we can get to sleuthing around for clues. I've already found a clue—”

“An hour!” I interrupted, aghast.

He didn't quite roll his eyes, but it was a near thing. “Yes, Zeng, an hour. It's also not much of a self-defense class if you don't rep out what's taught, is it?”

I opened my mouth to continue the argument. I shouldn't have bothered. Both because I knew, even back then, that I wouldn't win, and because in that very moment, a person who could only have been the instructor entered the court.

You'll notice that I hesitate here on how to describe our teacher that day. You know how some people just have a presence about them? An aura, I guess, that makes you realize pretty much from the get-go that they're going to leave an Impression, capital *I* very much intended, for better or worse. This particular Impression-leaving person was a woman, athletically built, all smooth muscle tone and sculpted shoulders, dressed in chain-mail print leggings and an artfully oversized white hoodie that had the vibe of something that had probably cost way more money than leggings and a hoodie had any right to, no matter how fun the print or nicely made the material. Really, the only things that made the woman look like anything other than a professional fitness model were in the little details: the subtle streaks of gray in her honey-gold hair, and the laugh lines and crow's feet sneaking their way into the smooth sun-kissed complexion of her face.

She clapped her hands together and looked around the room, the corners of her mouth tugged upward in a faintly familiar way I couldn't quite put my finger on. “Well, glad to see we've got such a great turnout.” Her voice matched her features: warm and inviting, effortlessly friendly. “I'll be your teacher today. You can call me Ro.

We'll start with warm-ups. Callum, my lovely assistant over there, will lead the way."

Obediently, Callum trotted up to the front of the class. "All right, ladies, let's start with a light jog just to get the blood flowing."

The light jog was not quite as bad as I'd anticipated. It was what followed afterward that nearly made me walk out on the class right then and there, murder mystery or no. I wasn't sure what was worse: the burpees, the planks, the jump squats, or the fact that Callum refused to give us any kind of ETA on when all this sweaty nonsense would end.

"Okay, ladies," he called at last—far too cheerfully, and not at all tired-looking enough for someone who'd demo'd the exercises right along with us—"good stuff, everyone. We've still got fifty minutes of class, and I'd rather get started on technique now that everyone's nice and warm."

Warm? That had been the warm-up?

Ro reappeared. "We're going to start with some groundwork. We'll open with the basics: buck, trap, and roll. Partner up, everyone, and let's hit the mats."

This buck, trap, and roll business, as it turned out, did not entail any eye gouging or crotch shots. It was, in fact, pretty much exactly what it sounded like. One partner, playing the attacker, pinned their victim down, straddling the waist. The partner playing the victim captured the attacker's arm and leg on one side, then bucked their hips up to put the attacker on their back. Theoretically, it was a pretty simple exercise. I could hear the other girls giggling self-consciously as they practiced bucking their hips up and rolling their partners onto the mat.

Unfortunately for me, my buck, trap, and roll partner was Callum.

"So," I panted, trying not to grunt under the weight of his superior

muscle mass as he sat atop my hips, “you said you found a clue?”

“I might have.” He sounded distracted. “You’ve got to get those hips off the floor, Zeng.”

“I am getting my hips off the floor! This so-called clue of yours—”

“We can talk about my clue after you get some momentum behind that buck. Heavens, Zeng, you’d think you’d never flexed your hips in your entire life.”

“Well, I’m not Shakira, am I?” I groaned, flopping my head back against the mat in defeat. “This is stupid. There’s no way I’d remember all of this if someone actually knocked me over and decided to pin me to the floor. They’d probably poke me in the eye while I was trying to remember all the moves.”

Callum blew an exasperated raspberry. “If you only practice all the moves like three times, of course they’re going to poke you in the eye first,” he informed me in what I thought was a pretty needlessly snooty tone. “Now, plant your feet—the closer to your ass, the better—and buck your hips up. Make me move.”

I bucked my hips up as hard as I could. Annoyance—and, I guess, planting my feet closer to my ass—gave me the momentum I needed. Callum laughed as he pitched forward, apparently delighted by my violence. “Good.” His palms landed on either side of my head. “Now, think of me as a table. These”—he wiggled his feet, then his hands—“are the table legs. If you want to flip a table, you’re going to need to take out the support from one side. Pick one and trap the table legs on that side.”

I glared up at him. “When are we going to talk about the clue?”

He grinned down at me, unperturbed. “When you flip me onto my back.”

It was a weird little moment. Look, let’s be honest here: I’m not the kind of girl who spends a ton of time getting aggressively

straddled by guys—or anyone, for that matter. It would have been impossible for the whole exercise not to be damn weird.

That's what I wanted to chalk the moment up to. Otherwise, I'd have to read into why I was suddenly so aware of the weight of his hips on mine, or the breadth of his shoulders looming over me. He smelled like laundry detergent and fresh mint. It was pretty sexy, actually, a thought that I'd rather take to my grave than ever admit to anybody. Weird, weird, weird. I didn't like this one bit.

I had to do something to cut through the weirdness. So I trapped an arm, trapped a leg, and bucked him over my shoulder as hard as I could.

He gave a thoroughly undignified squawk, followed by a thump, as his ass landed on the mat. I perched between his flailing legs, chin on my hands as I rested my elbows on his chest. "Okay, I've flipped you onto your back. What's this clue you supposedly found?"

Those blue eyes of his had gone wide—with surprise or fury, I wasn't sure. "Hot damn, Zeng."

"Tell me about the clue," I insisted, merciless. I dug my elbows a little harder into his sternum.

He winced. "Okay, okay! I should have called you bony wizard instead of squishy wizard. What did you stick to the ends of your elbows, kitchen knives?"

I am not without some pity in my cold black heart. I released Callum from my bony elbows and stood, offering a hand. Using it to haul himself to his feet, he chuckled. "Maybe *clue* is a strong word. But I think it's worth examining all the same."

He glanced from side to side. Just like that, the mask had slipped again, rendering him awkward and vulnerable, less preppy boy wonder and more, well, squishy wizard. When he was satisfied that none of the other girls were listening in on our conversation, he bent

his head toward mine and said, “The other night, I overheard Felix on a call—”

“Overheard or eavesdropped?” I interrupted.

“The manor is very large, the door was open, and Felix’s voice carries,” said Callum indignantly. “Anyway, I overheard him on a call with this lady, and it got super weird.”

I stared at Callum. “You think it’s weird that your classically handsome and charming older brother has conversations over FaceTime with women sometimes?”

“Let me finish,” huffed Callum. “It wasn’t about the woman. That part doesn’t matter. It’s what I heard him say to her.”

“I swear to god, Solomon, if this is all an elaborate ruse for you to sabotage your big brother’s attempts at online dating or something—”

“I don’t know who the woman was,” Callum cut in, ignoring me. “But I heard Felix say this much to her, loud and clear: ‘You’re the one who wanted him dead.’”

I stopped breathing for a moment.

That flinty look had returned to Callum’s previously playful blue-eyed gaze. “So it would seem,” he said, “that my brother had an accomplice.”