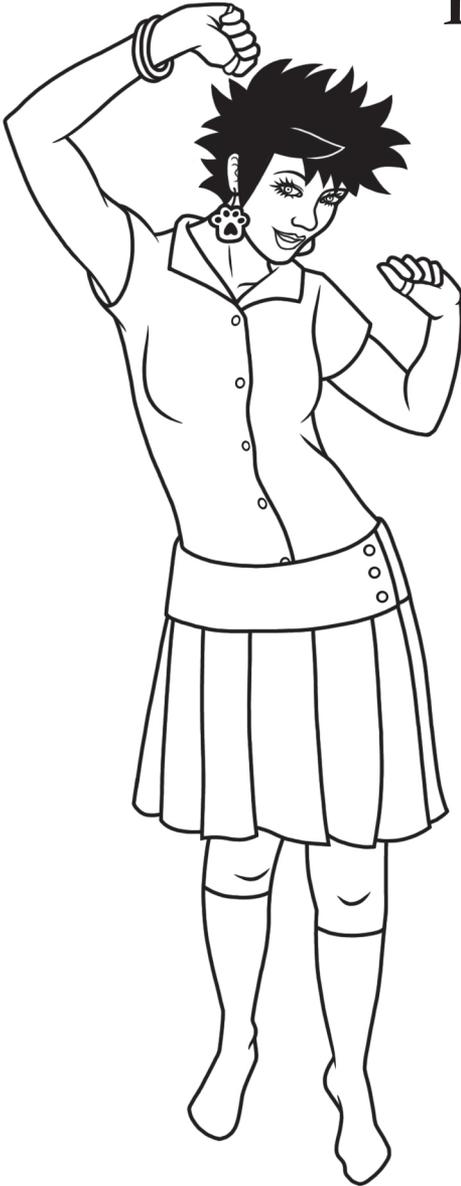


Chapter 1



Parker Hamilton stared at Tripp Macauley in disbelief as she engaged in a frantic victory dance around the six-foot-diameter circle they'd drawn with salt in the middle of his bedroom. Where did she get that kind of energy and whole-hearted glee after the terrifying ordeal of the exorcism spell they'd just completed?

He shook his head. You'd think she was six instead of sixteen.

As for himself, Parker felt more like *seventy* than seventeen.

The only celebrating he wanted to do was to crawl under the covers and forget the past few weeks had ever happened.

He caught sight of his reflection in an oval, gold-leaf mirror on the wall to his left and grimaced. His collar-length hair stood on end—and not because he'd gelled it that way on purpose, as Tripp had hers. But at least it was still blond, not the pure white he'd half-expected it to have turned. Even more surprising, his school uniform of khaki slacks and a short-sleeved, white, oxford shirt looked fairly neat, rather than torn to shreds.

Like his nerves.

Tripp, on the other hand, looked like she'd survived a tornado. Although he couldn't be sure if her school uniform of plaid, pleated skirt and white blouse had suffered from their morning's adventures or her crazy gyrations.

What concerned him most, though, wasn't what a mess she was, but whether she was going to make one. If she didn't watch out, she was going to break something.

He snatched up his grandmother's ancient, hand-bound spell book from beside the salt circle to protect it from potential trampling. Then he trudged across the room and gently set it on the antique table beside his Louis XVI, queen-sized bed. After a careless yank to semi-straighten the wad of linens at its center, he collapsed sideways across the bed and threw an arm over his eyes to block out Tripp.

Unfortunately, he could still hear her.

"I did it. I did it. I did it!" Tripp punctuated her self-serving statements with claps—and thumps of her stockinged feet that put her at risk of slipping on the wooden floor and falling on her butt.

"For God's sake," he said, longing for ear plugs. "You act as if I wasn't even here during the spell."

"Huh?" There were more thumps, then the creak of springs as the mattress dented beside him. "What did you say?"

"Quit hogging all the credit." He glared at Tripp from beneath his arm. "You know damned well, if I hadn't amplified and instructed you every step of the way, that spell would have gone *nowhere*."

And a demon would still possess Marc's body. Parker mentally shuddered.

Tripp tilted toward him, and the huge, black-on-orange cat's paws dangling from her ears swung like plastic pendulums. "Well, sure," she said with a mischievous grin. "I needed a *little* help from you."

"*A little?*" That did it. He flung his arm aside and scowled up at her. "Only a complete narcissist preoccupied with her own glory would call what I did *little*."

"Would you stop taking everything so seriously?" she said with a good-humored smirk. "I'm just teasing."

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Parker groaned. He was *not* a fan of perky. “Is all of life a big comedy to you?”

“Is all of life a big tragedy to *you*?”

“I’d say we were about an inch away from out-and-out tragedy a few minutes ago, yeah.”

“But it was a tragedy we magnificently averted. Which is something to celebrate.” She executed a triumphant fist pump.

“Quit shaking the bed or get off.”

“Boy, do you ever complain a lot.” Tripp rolled her eyes. “All right, fine. If you have to have serious, I’ll give you serious. I live to please.”

She rose with deliberation from the bed, joined her palms as if to pray, and bowed submissively. “Oh, hallowed wizard, I sincerely commend your most excellent efforts at magic,” she said in the sonorous tones of a salaaming genie.

Then she switched back to her normal bubbly self and said, “Tah dah. Your wish has been granted. Now it’s my turn. Say something nice to *me*.”

He raised his brows. As much as hated to admit it, she *had* been rather amazing for a total amateur with zero training in witchcraft. But did he really want to swell that enormous ego of hers some more?

He grunted and said, “You were okay.”

“*Okay*?” She lanced him with a squinty gaze. “That’s it? The whole enchilada?”

“Yep.” He pressed his lips together to hide a smile. Giving her a bit of her own back did wonders for his lousy mood.

“Parker Hamilton, I swear. You are the most aggravating human being I’ve ever met.”

“No kidding? And I was hardly trying.”

Tripp plunked her palms onto her hips, her orange-painted nails gleaming like ten miniature headlights, and heaved an elaborate sigh. “Would it kill you to offer a single kind word to a fellow traveler along the path of magic?”

“Probably.”

“Oh, *you*.” Tripp seized a pillow, leaped onto the bed, and thwacked him with it.

He jerked it away to keep her from splitting it open and spraying feathers everywhere, tossed it aside, and grabbed her hands before she could snag it again.

“Ow. You’re squeezing my rings.”

He instantly loosened his grip, and with an exultant, “Ha!” she took base advantage of his gentlemanly instincts to slither out of his grasp and dive for the pillow.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” He shoved aside a collection of plastic bracelets and imprisoned her wrists. “It wouldn’t hurt to be touched if you weren’t a walking jewelry store.”

“Gee, thanks for the fashion tip,” Tripp said with a pant, as she lost her balance, toppled across his chest, and slapped him in the teeth with a cat’s paw. “I’ll be certain to dress for the occasion the next time you maul me.”

“I’m not mauling you.” He flipped her onto her back, straddled her, and navigated around her bangles to manacle her wrists again. “I’m defending myself from an unjustified attack.”

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“Ooooh, did the big, bad pillow scare the poor, little man?”

Tripp said as she bucked beneath him.

As insults went, it wasn't one of her best, since at six-foot, he was by no definition small. “I'm bigger than *you*.” He settled lower against her thighs to cut down on her thrashing.

“And meaner.”

“Look who's talking. You're the one who was so busy patting yourself on the back when you called Isabel, you forgot to ask how she and Marc are.” Not to mention where they were and what they planned to do next.

Tripp broke off her struggles to gape at him, and Parker suddenly became aware of the fact that the two of them were in an extremely intimate position.

Dammit. What if she thought he was hitting on her?

He released Tripp and flung himself away from her so harshly, he slammed his shoulder against the headboard. He had no intention of getting involved with *any* girl at the moment. And even if he did, he wouldn't pick a pain-in-the-ass flake like Tripp.

He rubbed his shoulder absently, belatedly realizing he'd rejected her with a brutal lack of tact. But as Tripp sat up and twisted to face him, she seemed worried, not offended.

“Are you saying you think there might be something wrong with Isabel or Marc that she didn't tell me?”

Actually, no, now that he considered it. He couldn't imagine a teenage girl on the planet who would need prompting to spill her guts to her best friend. Particularly when that girl had been kidnapped by a demon who'd possessed the body of a seventeen-year-old boy.

Which meant that Tripp didn't deserve the guilt he was

heaping on her. But so what? It couldn't possibly do her anything but good to briefly experience an emotion other than self-satisfaction.

"Parker?" Tripp said.

"There's no way to know for sure," he said, remorselessly twisting the screws a little tighter, "until you decide it's worth your while to ask her."

That did it. She finally got the hell off his bed.

While Tripp skittered across the room and scooped her cell phone from the otherwise pristine top of his broad, claw-footed Sheraton desk, Parker stretched out his legs and reclaimed his territory.

"Isabel, it's me again." Tripp flopped into the black-leather executive chair behind the desk and leaned backward as if she were in a recliner.

Parker winced as, inevitably, she banged the mahogany, Georgian bookcase behind it.

"I forgot to ask how you and Marc are doing," Tripp said. "Are you okay?"

A second later she yelled, "You had to *fight* him off?"

"What?" He'd assumed they'd exorcised the demon before it had had a chance to do any major harm. The blame Parker had blithely dumped on Tripp ricocheted back on him with gut-wrenching impact, and he jumped to his feet.

"Oh, Isabel, that's awful," Tripp said as Parker skidded to a stop in front of his desk and glowered down at her.

"What did the demon do to her?" he said.

Tripp covered her free ear and whirled the chair a sharp

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one-eighty, concealing herself behind the wall of its high back. “But Isabel,” she said, “how can you be fine if he knocked you out?”

The demon beat her senseless and she didn't bother to mention it to Tripp? How could that be? “Tripp, answer me.” He sprang around the desk, yanked on the chair, and spun her around. “Does your friend need to go to the hospital?”

Tripp frowned and removed her hand from her ear to flap him away, but she'd obviously paid attention to him, because she told her friend, “Izzy, maybe you should see a doctor.”

An excruciating silence followed. “What is she *saying?*” He raked his fingers through his mad-professor hair, barely retraining the urge to tear it out. What *was* it with this girl? When he begged her to shut up, she flatly refused to pipe down. But now that he desperately wanted her to speak, he couldn't pry a word out of her.

“Isabel,” Tripp said, “Can you hang on a sec? Parker is frothing at the mouth. I have to fill him in about how you are.”

About time.

Tripp glanced up at him. “While Marc was possessed by the demon, he knocked Isabel out.”

“I *heard* that part. How *is* she?”

“She has a lump on her forehead and a headache, but she doesn't think either is bad enough to go to the doctor.”

“That's insane.” Parker slapped his palm on the desk. “She could have a concussion.”

“Don't get mad at *me*. It's Izzy's decision. And she says she doesn't have any signs of a concussion.”

“How could she possibly know that?”

“She plans to be a doctor someday.”

“So in the meantime she’s practicing medicine without a license on *herself*.” *Terrific*. Yet another grandiose narcissist who vastly overrated herself.

“What are you getting so bent out of shape about? It’s not your problem.”

Parker froze. Tripp actually had a point. Isabel *wasn’t* his problem.

He forced himself to calm down. If Isabel refused to see a *real* doctor, there was nothing Parker could do to make her. And, he reminded himself, it had never been his policy to participate in irrational conversations.

“Fine. Whatever. Forget it.” He shifted his focus to the one area that *was* his concern. “Just find out where they are so I can get my car back.”

For once she didn’t argue. Tripp asked her friend, then said to him, “They’re either out in the countryside or at a park. Isabel isn’t sure which. Nothing looks familiar.”

“There’s a GPS in the Corvette.”

“Oh, right. I should have figured you’d have one in your fancy-schmancy car.”

“Spare me the sarcasm and hand me your cell.” Parker reached for it, but she clutched it to her chest with both fists.

“What for?”

“So I can explain how to use it.”

“I know how GPS works. My dad’s car has it. I’m perfectly capable of telling Isabel how to use it.”

“*She* doesn’t need to know. Marc does.”

“Hold on a little longer, Isabel,” she said into her cell. Then

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she hopped up and faced off with him. “What do you mean she doesn’t need to know? Are you too sexist to let a *girl* drive your car?”

“I care too much about my car to want *anyone* to drive it.”

He crowded into her personal space and loomed over her. “But under the circumstances, since either Marc or Isabel *has* to drive it here, the least-worst person is the one who doesn’t have a head injury and might black out.”

Tripp paused, then shrugged. “All right. I’ll give you a pass on that one.”

“Big of you.”

Tripp never failed to irritate him, but it wasn’t her who was setting his teeth on edge at the moment. Until today, no one else had sat behind the wheel of Parker’s car since he got it on his sixteenth birthday. He wasn’t sure which bothered him more, having it stolen by the demon who’d hijacked Marc’s body, or allowing the real Marc to drive it home.

“Isabel, Parker wants to speak to Marc,” Tripp said into her cell, then gave it to Parker and leaned her hip against the desk as he put it to his ear.

“Hello?” Marc said.

As Parker automatically replied, it struck him that this was the first time he’d spoken to his former best friend, current family charity case, and semi-enemy since the day the demon had redirected Parker’s binding spell—and purposely bound himself to Marc instead of the wooden box Parker had planned on. Parker and Marc had fought shortly before that happened, and the level of viciousness involved had undoubtedly been ratcheted up by five years of festering, mutual resentment.

It was weirdly disorienting to launch into a prosaic discussion about his car's equipment, as if none of their murky history had ever occurred. But two sentences into his explanation of the GPS, that same history reared its ugly head when Marc cut him off saying, "I've got it."

"But—"

"See you." The connection went dead.

"Bastard." Parker flipped the cell closed, tossed it onto his desk and paced in front of it. He'd busted his ass to be not merely civil, but downright helpful, and *this* was the thanks he got.

"Hey." Tripp retrieved her cell. "Why did you end the call? I wanted to talk to Marc, too. This whole past week, I could only speak to him through Isabel. That was my first chance for direct contact."

"Second. You ignored him, too, when you called Isabel before."

"I didn't *ignore* him, Isabel—"

"Whatever. It's too late now. They're on the road. Save it for when he gets here."

"He's coming *here*?"

"Where else would he go? He lives here, and he has *my* car."

"Oh, yeah, right." Tripp bent under the desk and snagged her purse, a suitcase-sized monstrosity constructed from rope and Native-American throw rugs.

Parker stepped aside as she rose from the chair.

"Why don't we go down to your kitchen and fix Marc some food?" she said. "He must be starving."

A French portico clock beside the door leading to the third-floor hallway chimed eight times.

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“I doubt it,” Parker said. “The demon stuffed Marc’s body less than two hours ago.”

“He’s a growing boy. And he has almost a week’s worth of meals to make up for.”

Inexplicably, Tripp’s cheeky grin soothed Parker’s still-simmering anger, and he suddenly noticed that he was ravenous himself—unlike the gluttonous demon, Parker hadn’t had a bite to eat this morning.

He made only a token protest when Tripp grabbed his arm and playfully dragged him toward the back stairs.