



*Indebted
In Death*

THE TALE OF BRYANT ADAMS

MEGAN O'RUSSELL

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Megan O’Russell

Lola

I hate boots. I hate darkness. I hate places that smell like death warmed over and spawned babies with rot.

But more than creeping along nasty tunnels no civilized person should ever enter, I hate wizards who think they have a natural born right to lord over every magical creature Manhattan has to offer.

The pale orb of blue light flickering in my hand didn't do much to improve my ever-fading morale as the shadows on the walls swirled and twisted into horrible shapes.

Men looming over beasts, forcing them to scramble through the shadows. Blood still flowing from the wounds of those long dead.

"Just once in this sad seer's life, you couldn't show me rainbows and kittens in the shadows?" I whispered as tendrils of darkness reached out, wrapping themselves around my sensible black combat boots. "Get the hell off me."

I kicked the shadows away. I didn't feel anything as leather met darkness, but the shadows recoiled in a satisfying way all the same.

The crunch of tiny bones beneath my feet had dulled to monotony when the scratching and howling started up the tunnel. The sounds sent shivers down my spine. I love puppies, I swear I do, but that wasn't a joyful yipping of poodles chasing butterflies and small children in the park.

Exquisite pain filled each note, and the hollow tone held a rattle of death.

The shadows danced around me like the evil little bastards they were, whether from joy at the pain of those ahead or in mocking at my shivering shoulders, I don't rightly know.

"Oh, I am comin' for you." My voice bounced off the narrow walls, carrying into the dim light glowing feebly from the end of the tunnel.

The howling stopped.

With a flick of the wrist, I vanished the light from my palm. Best not to show too much magic to those who have been burdened by it.

A door of worn metal blocked my path. There wasn't even a pretty pattern woven into the rusted grating. Some people just do not appreciate the proper way to utilize the magnificence so easily within the grasp of those gifted in wizardry. Thin strings of magic danced in and out of my sight, hidden deep within the gate. While having shadows trying to scare the ever-loving soul out of you isn't pleasant, seeing does have its advantages.

"*Elisio*." My word sent a spell shimmering around my hand like a glove. The magic had a yellow sheen to it, tinging my sparkling blue manicure with a

green hue worthy of the Wicked Witch of the West. “Don’t worry, Toto. Lola’s not here to hurt you, precious.”

White-hot light zapped through the gate at my touch, but my spell protected my hand enough that only an unpleasant buzz itched my skin. Not something one really enjoys, but better than getting stung by a swarm of angry bees.

A thick deadbolt kept the gate closed tight against the stone, but the tumbler turned with a heavy *clunk*.

You would have thought I’d sounded the alarm for the end of the world with all the terrified howling that split the darkness as I eased open the gate.

“Shh, babies,” I cooed as I slipped through the opening. “I’m not here to hurt anybody. I just want to get you out of this hellhole. There isn’t anybody who has a right to chain...” The words disappeared from my mouth, replaced with the foul taste of bile.

I knew when I’d decided to creep into the tunnels under Beville that what I was looking for wasn’t going to be a pleasant thing to find, but knowing and being ready are two very different things.

A row of decaying animals crouched next to the stone walls. Heavy chains wrapped around each of the poor creatures’ necks. The weight of the metal pulled on their deteriorating flesh, ripping away patches deep enough to show bone beneath.

“I am so sorry, my precious creatures.” My hand trembled as I swung the gate closed behind me. The screech of the metal hinges set the creatures howling again.

It pained me to look at them, and I don’t mean in the disgusted way. The hounds that live deep within the shadows of the earth were never meant to be considered beautiful by wizard standards. With limbs like a human’s and faces with the muzzles of dogs, there could never be hope of a shadow hound running for Miss America.

But some unacceptably evil son of a bitch had dragged these poor creatures out of death itself and chained them to a wall. And that’s shit I cannot abide.

“Hold on, my sweet, precious pups.” I kept my tone low and calm, pushing down the rage that sorely tempted me to burn everything from Beville to Paris just to make sure the bastard who’d done this felt the flames. “Lola didn’t come here to hurt you. Lola came here to let you out.”

A tiny pup who couldn’t have made it past ten before death took him had been chained closest to the gate. I held my palms out as I inched toward him. The boy bared his teeth, tugging at the chain around his torn up neck in his

desperation to bite me.

“Now if you kill me,” I said, “how am I supposed to let you out? I don’t want to do anything but take these chains off you and let you find peace in the darkness.”

The child sniffed my palms.

“Isn’t that what you want, child?” I moved my hand closer, near enough that the boy could bite off a few fingers if he cared to try. “You want to go far beneath and lie in peace?”

The boy pressed his nose to my palm. The cold from his flesh was worse than ice. Worse than the cold fury of hatred. The freezing pain of death flooded my hand, setting my shoulders to shaking. But he didn’t tear a chunk out of me or dive straight for my jugular.

“That’s right, precious,” I whispered. “Lola just wants to be your friend.”

The pup tipped his head to the side, showing the lock that kept the chains tight around him.

“That’s it. Now just hold nice and still.” I pulled one of the earrings from my ear, a long, dangly masterpiece with sapphires, emeralds, and onyx all blending together in the most magnificent way. I won’t lie and say bending the gold out of shape to make a lock pick didn’t hurt my heart, but when undead souls are on the line, concessions must be made.

“You know what I hate, my precious creature?” I whispered to the boy as I worked the tumblers of the lock and sharp zaps of magic stung my skin. “I hate wizards who put spells on normal things like locks because they are too damn foolish to use magic that will actually get the job done. I mean, please explain to me what sort of a wizard thinks chains are still in style?”

“The sort of wizard who doesn’t like people touching his things,” a gritty voice spoke from by the gate.

A foul odor, worse than the general death of the shadow hounds, crept up behind me.

“I hate the stench of garlic and assumed power.” I popped open the lock around the pup’s neck. “You just know that a short man with bad hair and a stunted sense of decency carried that stink in with him.” I stood slowly, brushing the dust off my perfectly-fitted black jeans before bothering to turn around. “And look who doesn’t have to be a seer to be right.”

A short, balding man with greasy red hair and a smile to kill a thousand sex drives stood inside the gate.

“These are my dogs.” The man crossed his arms.

“Your dogs.” I pulled myself up to my full and very considerable height. “Your dogs? And what in this magical world makes you think you have the right

to drag these creatures from their home and chain them up?”

“The Ladies gave their blessing.” The man spread his arms wide, a sanctimonious grin coating his butt-ugly face. “They called it a fitting reward for services rendered.”

“The souls of these precious creatures are not a reward for the giving.” My voice dropped lower as I growled. It was almost fun to watch the man’s scraggly eyebrows climb up his pasty forehead. “And you will not be keeping them.”

Crackles of magic sparked around the undead animal-abusing ginger’s fingers. “I’ll defend my property.”

“You should’ve stopped before you said that.” Heat built, starting at the center of my lungs, trickling down my arms. “I would’ve been nice to you. Knocked you out, let these poor precious creatures go, gone home and taken enough baths to wash your stench off my skin. But now you went and called them property, and that is something Lola cannot abide.”

Streams of blue light flew from my fingertips like cat claws and whips had deadly little babies. I felt them wrapping around his nasty little head like the spell was an extension of my own hand.

The dogs around me howled in terror, but their noise didn’t cover the screams of the ginger.

With a *crack* like he’d snapped my pinky in two, gingy busted out of my spell, breaking my nail right down the center.

“You son of a—”

“Sorry.” Gingy smiled, the strips of the burns I’d left on him contorting in the most disgusting way. “Did I ruin your manicure?”

A streak of red burrowed through the ground toward my ugly ass boots. I grabbed for the chain I’d taken from the pup’s neck as the floor beneath me shattered, tumbling away into nothing. Pain seized my shoulder as I caught my weight. For one terrible moment, I thought the whole room would collapse and send the precious pups and me tumbling into darkness. It would be going home to them, the freedom I’d come to give, but my dying hadn’t been a part of the field trip’s schedule.

“*Caruson.*” With a *crack*, my spell cut a jagged divot into the stone large enough to for me to regain my footing.

A tiny, yet decaying hand grabbed my wrist and yanked me out of the pit with strength no normal child, living or dead, should ever possess.

I ducked my head just in time to avoid bashing it open on the moldy stone of the ceiling.

“*Stasio!*” I shouted as my feet met the narrow strip of intact floor.

The shimmering walls of my spell closed in around gingy, penning him

next to his magically-enhanced gate. Sparks of light zapped him. I won't lie and say his yips of pain didn't sound satisfying.

"I am going to give you a choice." A smile drifted onto my lips. "You can give me the keys to let these poor creatures go, and I'll let you stumble on home." I flexed my fingers, letting the spell press him closer to the gate. "Or you can be the scum I think you are, refuse, and I'll toss you down this pit and break the locks open the slow way."

"And risk breaking another nail?" Gingy grunted.

"I will tear my nails from my own flesh if that's what it takes to set innocent creatures free."

Gingy spat at me. Blood and spittle hit the toe of my boot. "You wouldn't have the balls. Or would you? It's so hard to tell."

"Exci."

Gingy grunted as the pink shimmer of my spell pummeled his unfortunate face.

"What lies between my legs is neither your business nor the most interesting part of the fabulousness that is me. *Exci.*"

Blood trickled from gingy's mouth.

"The only thing you need to know"—I dropped the barrier that held him to the gate—"is that beneath the makeup and manicures, I am more of a man than you'll ever be, and a far better woman than would ever stoop low enough as to poke your disgusting hide. Have fun in Hell. *Turso.*"

Wisps of black whipped his ankles, his feet flew out from under him, and he pinwheeled his arms in the most comical way. I do hate speaking ill of the dead, but that evil little man looked like a cartoon character as he fell to his squished up death.

I stared down into the pit, though I couldn't see where he'd gone.

A cold touch of death pressed into the back of my hand. The little pup leaned against me, shaking with fear. It's never seemed right to me that fear should have the ability to follow anything into death. "You're all right now, precious." I ran my fingers through his matted, undead hair. "I'm going to get the rest of you out, and then you'll be free to go wherever you like."

The pup stared up at me, his eyes wide and blazing.

"Or you can stay with Lola." I resisted the urge to wiggle what was left of his nose. "I always have room for friends."

The pup sagged his weight against my thigh.

I scanned what was left of the ground for my fantastic earring-turned-lock pick. It had disappeared with most of the floor.

"No good in one without the other." I pulled the other earring out and

flattened it into a pick. “We’d best speed this up. There’s going to be hell to pay for this one, and I hate strife without skittles.”