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DEMONS HIDE

The river walk was the most peaceful place Ty knew. Parts of it ran through the city park, where people were always gathered, and part ran down to the Black Bridge, the old iron railroad and pedestrian bridge that crossed the river to one of the parts of town Ty avoided.

But between those two points, it was peaceful. And beautiful, especially in spring when tons of wildflowers grew.

Too bad it was fall. And too bad Ty wasn't alone on the walk today.

Heart pounding, he stopped short in the middle of the curve in the path. Ahead of him, some guys from school were clustered around something. He couldn't see what, and he doubted he wanted to. For all he knew, they'd found someone else to beat up. Not that he would want to see that happen to anyone else, but it would be a relief not to be the only one for a change.

Their voices weren't quite loud enough for him to make out what they were saying. That was probably a good thing too.

The one thing he did know was that he couldn't continue his walk. Those guys were bad enough when they caught him at school or out around town. Down here, where no one else would see, there was no telling what they might do to him.

He hated being afraid. His entire life, he'd had to hide so people wouldn't hurt him. Now he was sixteen, almost an adult, and he shouldn't have had to hide from anyone anymore. But thanks to assholes like the guys at school, he couldn't be safe anywhere.

Footsteps sounded behind him, and he whirled around, ready to face whoever was sneaking up on him. He took a deep breath, ready to scream even though the only ones who would hear wouldn't care what happened to him.

"Easy." Latham Rogers walked up to him, either not noticing or not caring that Ty was ready to fight.

Ty blinked and let out his breath. "Latham. You scared the crap out of me."

"Sorry." Latham actually looked apologetic. "You shouldn't be down here."

"I'm always here." He glanced at the group of guys up ahead. Probably Latham was going to join them. He hung out with them sometimes. He wasn't one of the ones who hassled Ty, though. Actually, he was someone Ty would have considered a friend if he'd felt like he had any friends at the hellhole of a high school.

In his deepest secret daydreams, he and Latham were more than friends. But there was no way in hell he would ever tell anyone that, least of all Latham. Most guys weren't thrilled to find out another guy fantasized about them.

“You’re lucky no one’s hurt you,” Latham said. He turned his back on the group and looked at Ty with an intensity that made Ty fidget. “This isn’t a good place.”

“Up there isn’t.” Ty nodded toward the bridge. “I’ve never run into any problems before.”

“That’s because you’re you.” Latham tilted his head to one side and gave Ty something resembling a smile.

Tentatively, Ty smiled back, and his heart fluttered like an enormous butterfly. He’d spent time talking with Latham at school and once or twice when they’d run into each other around town. He’d definitely been crushing on the guy, but he’d never felt anything like this.

Connection.

The word floated through Ty’s mind and he dismissed it.

“You don’t belong here,” Latham said.

“I’m always here,” Ty said again.

“I don’t mean just on the walk.” Latham glanced over his shoulder.

So far the guys didn’t seem to have noticed them. That was a huge relief to Ty. Eventually they’d realize someone was watching, though, and that wouldn’t be good. Even if Latham had his back, the two of them wouldn’t be able to take on five guys who were probably high or something. Everyone at school knew those guys used, even though three of them were athletes who were supposedly living clean lives.

Dark clouds were forming just beyond the guys. They seemed to be centered over the bridge, though that didn’t make sense. Ty rubbed his eyes and looked again.

Dark clouds. Black Bridge. The group of guys sounding more excited, even though he still couldn’t quite make out their words. All of them facing the bridge now.

At least they wouldn’t notice Ty and Latham, but that didn’t comfort Ty much.

“You need to get out of here.” Latham’s tone changed from the friendly way in which he’d greeted Ty to something deep and dangerous. “You aren’t safe.”

“What’s going on?” The words came out in a squeaky voice that made Ty cringe. He sounded like a scared little kid.

He wasn’t that anymore. And if Latham wasn’t afraid, he wouldn’t be either.

“Dude.” Latham turned to face him, an expression of pure exasperation on his face.

His eyes were glowing.

Ty took a step back and touched his tongue to his too-dry upper lip. “I’m not leaving you alone with whatever’s going on.”

“I *am* what’s going on.”

The words made no sense until Latham raised his arms.

The clouds above the bridge rose too. And the darkness deepened.

Ty's legs shook and his heart raced. His breath caught in his throat.

Chilling wind whipped across the river. Ty shivered.

The wind didn't seem to touch Latham at all. And now Latham's eyes glowed red.

"What are you?" Ty whispered.

Latham shouldn't have been able to hear him over the noise of the wind, but he answered. "You don't want to know. Ty, get out of here. Please. I don't know if I can protect you right now, and I don't want anything to happen to you."

"I don't want anything to happen to you either." Ty moistened his lips again and steadied himself, legs apart, arms to his sides. If Latham wasn't afraid, he refused to be. Even if this was a situation where fear was probably the smartest reaction.

"I am what's happening." Latham lowered his arms, and the clouds dropped low enough to obscure the top of the bridge.

"Awesome!" one of the guys down the path exclaimed. "We've got it!"

"They don't know what they're doing." Latham sighed. "Forces they don't understand. They won't be happy when they realize what they've done. Ty, please go."

"No." Ty stuffed his clenched fists into the pockets of his worn denim jacket.

He didn't understand why he wasn't listening to Latham. Whatever was going on here was something Ty wouldn't be able to handle. He couldn't even handle walking down the halls at school while people called him names, and this was a hell of a lot more dangerous.

But something inside him stirred. Something bright and shining that usually slept in the corners of his mind.

Something that whispered to him not to be afraid. This was the time for him to stand up and do what he was meant to do.

None of it made sense, but Ty listened. Latham needed him. The one guy at school who defended him needed him now.

Latham bit his lip. "You don't know—"

Ty cut him off. "I don't care. Tell me, Latham." His voice was strong and steady now, and part of him wondered at it. He didn't sound like himself at all.

The darkness deepened, and the guys down the path cheered.

"They've summoned it." Latham spoke in a near monotone, and he turned away from Ty to face the bridge. "You've heard the stories. Everyone has."

“Yeah.” Evil crap happened at the bridge, supposedly. People fought. People died. People disappeared and were never seen again. No one ever remembered what had happened to them.

Ty had always avoided actually walking across the bridge, because just being near it had made him feel sick to his stomach. But as long as he hadn’t set foot on it, he’d been able to tolerate it. Now he realized there was more to it than he’d thought.

“Do you have time to tell me the truth?” he asked, even as the scared-little-boy part of him screamed that he didn’t want to know the truth at all.

“You see me.” Latham looked up.

His eyes glowed red, swirling like the flames of a wildfire in his too-pale face. His brown hair appeared jet black, and Ty wasn’t sure whether it was because of the darkness or something within Latham himself.

Demon, the voice in Ty’s mind said.

No. Ty wasn’t denying what the voice told him. He saw the proof for himself. There was no other name for what stood in front of him.

No other name except Latham. His friend. The guy he’d thought about in bed at night when no one else in his foster home was awake.

“I’ve been trying to keep you from getting too close.” Latham’s voice was low and gravelly now. Dark like his appearance. “I wanted to be your friend, Ty, but I couldn’t let you find out what I am.”

“Demon.” Speaking the word aloud made it more real.

Latham nodded. “You could say that. It isn’t something I chose.”

“I know.” Ty took a step forward, and Latham held up his hand. Ty shook his head and took another step. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be.”

The clouds lowered further. The group of guys shouted, some now sounding frightened.

Barrett Graves, Ty’s chief tormentor, didn’t seem at all bothered. In fact, he turned toward Latham and Ty with pure joy on his face.

“Ty!” Barrett sounded pleased.

“Run,” Latham urged. His voice broke. “Ty. Please.”

“No.”

Ty stood straighter and again let his hands fall to his sides as Barrett and the others approached. Whatever was happening here was so much more serious than being slammed into a locker or kicked in the gut, and yet he was less afraid than he’d ever been. Barrett

couldn't hurt him this time.

A faint glow broke the clouds.

"I should have known you'd be around here, you frigging perv." Barrett stopped directly behind Latham, staring at Ty with lowered eyebrows and a face twisted into something barely human. "Fag. Bet you come down here to play with yourself in the bushes while you watch the kids in the park, right?"

"I'm not the one who hurts children." Again Ty spoke in the strong, steady voice which had surprised him so much. And he knew as he said the words that he wasn't only answering Barrett's accusation. "How many have you hurt, Barrett? How many have you destroyed?"

"What did you tell him?" Barrett shoved Latham.

Latham stumbled forward and whirled to face Barrett. "Don't touch me. You are not strong enough to take me, and you know it."

"Barrett?" Harley Warren's voice shook. His wide eyes and trembling hands showed that whatever he'd been expecting when he'd followed his leader down to the river walk, this wasn't it. "What's happening?"

"Shut up." Barrett didn't even look at him.

A gust of wind knocked Harley off his feet without touching any of the others.

One of the others shrieked and turned to run. The wind caught him too, shoving him to the ground a few feet from Harley. He struggled to rise but couldn't.

"Let them go." This time Ty's voice shook slightly. Barrett was the same thing as Latham. He wasn't entirely sure what that was, though the word "demon" fit as well as anything.

He could only hope Latham was the stronger of the two.

If not, he would help.

The light penetrating the clouds grew almost imperceptibly brighter.

Barrett lunged around Latham, reaching out for Ty. Ty froze, heart pounding, brain screaming at him to run.

Latham grabbed Barrett by the jacket and flung him backward. Shards of red like those in Latham's eyes shot through the darkness around them.

"He's mine," Latham growled. "You will not hurt him."

Latham wasn't much taller than Ty, but as he spoke a dark form larger than any human could have been surrounded him. Ty stepped back again, gasping for air that didn't seem to reach his lungs.

The darkness pressed in on him, crushing him. He should have run as Latham had

told him to. He wasn't safe here.

"No." He couldn't hear his own voice; he only felt his mouth forming the word.

"He's fair game." Barrett's voice was as much of a growl as Latham's. "Just like my friends over here. All of them are done for. Idiots thought they would have fun doing a little ritual. Get some power. Strength for the games." Each word was raspier than the previous. "They thought they could take what's ours."

"It isn't yours." The form around Latham grew. "And neither is Ty."

The blackness hurt Ty's eyes but he refused to look away. The light glow had dimmed but was still there, the only thing keeping Ty from being completely blinded.

"Your pet?" Barrett chuckled. "You do him yet? I bet he'd love that, the little queer."

One of the boys on the ground whimpered. The other lay completely still, and Ty couldn't judge whether he was still alive. Barrett's other two buddies just stood there, slack-jawed and frozen.

"Frigging fag." Barrett sneered. He sounded almost normal.

Ty flinched but caught himself. He wasn't taking any more of this. Not the standard-issue bullying, and not the darkness.

"Don't call me that." The words echoed around them, and the light grew brighter. Ty kept speaking with no clue where the words came from and no question that they were right. "This is not your place. I am not yours to use or abuse anymore."

The light grew still more. Latham turned, flaming eyes wide. "Ty?"

"Don't turn your back on him." Ty nodded toward Barrett, who was moving toward Latham once again.

Latham whirled around in time to send Barrett flying backward. Red infused the white glow, and this time Ty recognized it as Latham's power joining his own.

Power he shouldn't have had. That he'd never known he possessed.

Barrett growled and leapt to his feet, landing partially on Harley's still form. A wave of darkness washed over Ty, stealing the breath from his lungs.

The tiny, terrified part of his brain screamed. This couldn't be happening. Barrett was just a bully. Latham was just a burn-out who treated Ty like a human being.

And Ty was nothing. He'd been told that all his life. He was just the little fairy faggot who deserved to be treated like shit and would be lucky to survive high school.

"No." No sound came from his mouth. Only the shape of the word. "I am something. I am more than anyone has ever known."

The statement didn't seem to come from him, but from something larger and brighter than he had ever known. Strength and power filled him, and without fully

understanding what he was doing, he lashed out with it.

The light cut through the darkness. Barrett howled, a noise full of pain and agony. Latham shuddered but held his ground.

The light wrapped around the red shards. Holding. Comforting. Joining to push back the blackness.

Ty shook with the effort of whatever the hell he was doing. He forced himself to keep his eyes open as the darkness ebbed, shoved away by his power combined with Latham's. Latham might call himself demon, but he was fighting against the darkness and Barrett, who was clearly the same thing.

And then another wave of darkness hit, stronger than before, washing over Ty with a force that swept him off his feet. He struggled to keep some contact with the ground, but he was losing. The light dimmed, and he couldn't see, think, or breathe.

Now he screamed, and without thought reached down into the well of power inside him. Something reached back, filling him, flooding him.

Latham yelled something, and flame engulfed the path and those on it. Ty saw it only in his mind's eye, but he felt the heat and fire.

He swore he was flying apart and it didn't even matter, because he was fighting for the first time in his life, and this time he would win. Even if it destroyed him.

Wind roared in his ears, and somehow he struggled back to his feet. Blinded by darkness, he could no longer see Latham or Barrett, but he felt and tasted their power. Instinctively he reached for Latham's red-black and once again joined his own light with it.

The flames rose, surrounding all of them. They should have burned, and yet Ty felt only a vaguely uncomfortable heat.

"Mine!" Barrett howled.

"No." Latham's word cut through the shrieking wind and sliced the darkness with a red blade. "Ty is mine. This place is mine, and you will not hurt him or it."

"I'm yours, but the place is mine." With effort, Ty forced his shoulders back and sent out all the light he contained.

And again he tore apart and this time felt nothing. Nothing at all except triumph.

The shrieking grew to an intensity that hurt like hell, and it didn't matter, because after a split second Ty felt nothing. Heard nothing. Was nothing.

"No, you're definitely something."

Ty shook his head and blinked, trying to merge his blurred, doubled vision into something that made sense. He lay on cold pavement. Something warm trickled down the side of his neck, and he didn't want to find out whether it was blood.

Latham knelt beside him, relief and fear mingled in his brown eyes. A perfectly

normal brown.

If Ty hadn't known better, he would have sworn Barrett and his pals had beaten the crap out of him and left him unconscious on the path. That everything else had been just a messed-up hallucination caused by concussion.

Except he still felt the strength and power flooding through him, and even though Latham's eyes were their normal brown, flicks of red flashed in them.

He took a deep breath and tried to wet his dry lips with an equally dry tongue. "Demons."

"I tried to keep you from finding out." Latham slipped one hand beneath Ty's back. "Can you sit up?"

"Maybe."

Ty let Latham help him ease up into a sitting position. A few yards away, the bodies of Barrett's friends were scattered like cast-off dolls. Two of them moved slightly. Harley and the fourth boy were completely still, and the other boy's neck was twisted in a way no neck should be.

Barrett was nowhere in sight.

"I don't know what you did." Latham put his arm around Ty's shoulders, steadying him. "Barrett... isn't. He just isn't anymore."

"You're still here." Ty looked up at him, and his heart swelled. He and Latham were two sides of a coin. They could have been in opposition, but instead they were joined.

He laughed, and Latham gave him a strange look. "There isn't anything funny."

"Not funny. Happy." He didn't have words to explain and didn't really see a need for explanations.

Before he could ignore the impulse, he cupped the back of Latham's head with one hand and pulled him down for a kiss. The moment their lips touched, he knew that no matter how little sense his thoughts had made, they were true.

Latham jerked back, staring wide-eyed at Ty. He shook his head. "We can't be."

"We are." Ty wasn't entirely sure what he meant, but again, it didn't matter. "Help me over to them."

"Cal's gone." Latham held out his hands.

Ty took them and carefully rose onto trembling legs. He tried to take a step and would have fallen flat on his face if Latham hadn't caught him. In Latham's embrace, Ty felt safe.

And strong. Stronger than he had ever dreamed of being.

It wasn't a power to abuse. It existed to help. It was light.

He blinked a few times and looked into Latham's eyes. "What are you?"

"You called it," Latham said. "Demon. You saw."

"Then what am I?"

"I don't know." Latham took Ty's hand.

The sense of *joining* rushed through Ty again, and when he looked into Latham's eyes he knew Latham felt it too.

"Help me over to them." Ty's legs still shook too much for him to trust them to hold him.

"What are you going to do?" Latham slipped one arm under Ty's and held Ty's shoulder with the other hand. He took a small step and Ty followed.

"I don't know." Ty studied the four figures strewn on the ground. "But I can help them."

"Why would you want to after everything they've done to you?" Latham guided him to Cal. The boy's dulled eyes stared sightlessly upward. "You can't bring him back."

"No." Although Ty wished otherwise, he knew the truth. "The rest are alive, though. I can help."

"Why?" Latham asked again.

"Because it isn't right to leave them this way." Ty took a step toward Harley and his knees buckled. He looked at Latham. "Bring me over to him, please."

Latham helped Ty to a spot in the midst of the three boys who still lived and lowered Ty to his knees. He moved a few feet back and pulled a phone out of his pocket. "I'm going to report the body. We'll have to get out of here before anyone shows up, though."

Ty nodded and focused on the boys in front of him. He wasn't entirely sure what he needed to do, but whatever it was wouldn't take long. He would be finished in time for him and Latham to get away.

Trusting his newly-awakened instincts to guide him, he closed his eyes and reached for that power. It swelled, filling him, spilling over to the three boys. Bright light warmed Ty's eyelids and he forced himself not to open them.

Behind him, Latham murmured into his phone. Ty ignored the words and pushed the light toward Harley and the other two boys.

"Careful," Latham said softly. "Don't hurt yourself."

Ty didn't respond. The light entered the boys, touching the injured pieces of them, both physical and mental. Healing the pain. Breaking the darkness into tiny bits that wouldn't harm them anymore.

He was dimly aware that the power flowing out of him was too much. He was giving his own strength to the boys, and if he gave too much, he would lose it all.

With effort, he pulled back from them, urging the light and power back into its place within him. He rocked back on his heels, breathing heavily, and opened his eyes.

The boys were moving. Breathing. Making sounds that weren't quite words.

Ty's body was too heavy to move, but he didn't have a choice. There would be too many questions if he and Latham were found there. Especially with Cal's dead body beside them. The other three would survive, but Cal was beyond help. Even the light inside Ty couldn't bring someone back from the dead.

"Help me," he said to Latham.

Again Latham wrapped his arms around Ty and helped him to his feet. Ty's legs were even less willing to hold him up than before, but he took a step anyway. Latham tightened his grip. "Stick with me. They won't see us as long as you're with me."

Ty nodded and opened his mouth but realized he couldn't speak. He allowed Latham to guide him up the path toward the bridge. It was the wrong direction, but they would have encountered too many people, so Ty didn't complain.

Sirens wailed nearby, and Ty focused on taking each step despite the pounding of his heart. No one would find them. He had nothing to fear.

He'd fought a demon and won. Compared to that, nothing was frightening.

The walk led past the bridge and around a sharp curve to continue up beyond the city pool. The entire way, Latham held Ty, supporting him. Connecting with him, and Ty didn't even try anymore to figure out what that meant.

By the time they reached the main street, Ty's legs were steadier. He pulled away from Latham both to prove he could and because he doubted Latham wanted anyone to see him holding the "fag."

But Latham took his hand and stared into his eyes. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Shaky and tired as hell, but yeah." Ty managed a smile. "You?"

"All I did was what I always do." Latham shrugged. "I don't know what you are, Ty. I knew there was a light in you, and I've done everything I could to keep it safe. Now I think it's up to both of us. I don't know what's going on, but I'm with you. Okay?"

"Yeah." He squeezed Latham's hand, knowing that "with" meant more than either of them understood just then. More than they needed to understand.

In a moment, he would walk away from Latham and go back to his foster home, where he would most likely be ignored. He would do his homework. He would wait for the next day, when it would start all over again.

But he wouldn't be afraid. He had found the light, and with that and Latham, nothing

could touch him. Whatever he and Latham were meant to do, they would do together.

He let go of Latham. "See you tomorrow."

"Yeah." Latham hesitated, then quickly kissed Ty's lips. "Be careful. You don't know what you've just gotten into."

"Neither do you." Ty stepped back, still smiling. "You be careful too. We'll figure it out."

"Yeah."

Latham was the first to turn away, and Ty watched him leave. He didn't even know what they had to figure out, but whatever it was, he was on the verge of something huge.

And he wasn't afraid. He would never be afraid again.