

NIGHTMARE

A HIDDEN STORY

M. LATHAN

CHAPTER ONE

WE'RE HAVING a dinner party out on the beach with our little group called The Parentals, debating everything most people know better than to discuss over dinner. The issue of immigration, of the magical variety, has the Arnauuds standing, shouting, and banging their hands on the table. The Ewings are a little drunk and antagonizing them for fun.

I lean over to rest my head on Gavin's shoulder. "What are the odds of them fighting each other with little balls of magic again?" he whispers.

Zain smiles from the other end of the table, raises his glass of water, and says, "Very high. I'll take that bet." No whisper is too quiet for those ears.

"Can we all just agree that life wouldn't be the same without every species being able to live where they want?" I ask. "I mean, we wouldn't know Sophia at all if not for magical immigration."

Lacy throws a look over her shoulder. "Wasn't she born in America, Lydia?"

"No, she came here straight from Hell." Wine-fueled laughter takes over the table. Even Sophia's son chokes on

his last sip. We're still laughing when the Devil herself wanders over to our table with baby Sophie in her arms.

"What's so funny? Certainly, it isn't Lydia."

"It's nothing," Gavin says. He grabs my hand under the table. It's a plea not to provoke my nemesis. Sophia and I have been going at it like deranged kittens all week.

She takes a seat at the table. To be clear, she wasn't invited to this party but is still somehow here. I suddenly make it my business to gather the empty wine bottles and announce that I'll return with more. My powers tell me to duck when I enter the kitchen. Christine and Emma are practicing for the anchoring ritual, and it's going ... as expected. Christine loses control of an arrow made of fire, and it flies exactly where my head would've been.

"Mom, *omagod*. Sorry!"

"It's okay, angel. Maybe ... take a break?"

Magic is a brutal practice for humans. Our brains are meant for our own power, and it fights witchcraft tooth and nail. But I haven't discouraged them. I know it'll work out fine. I've seen it.

Emma makes Christine squeal with a sudden rainfall in the living room. It seems to confuse canine Nathan, and after swatting at raindrops, he hides a small fraction of his furry body under the coffee table.

I sense yet another dinner party crasher coming here before they arrive. Paul appears in the kitchen dressed identically to my husband: Chrome Hearts jewelry and all. Though I know exactly what will happen, I say nothing as he passes me and walks out of the sliding doors.

Three, two, one...

The table erupts in laughter again. Paul's dad forces him to show off his outfit and take a picture with Gavin, his

apparent idol. I return to the table and refresh everyone's drinks. And God, my eyes catch Sophia's.

She scowls at me because she's a miserable old hag.

"Okay, that's it," Gavin says, and the party comes to a sudden stop. He's normally soft-spoken, but his voice on full volume has the effect of thunder followed by an immediate slash of lightning. It surprises everyone but me. "Enough of this fighting. Sophia, if I beat you at ... let's say ... a dance battle, Lydia doesn't have to apologize for what she did."

Sophia shakes her head with a sharp no, but the crowd wants this. *Needs* this. Soon, there are too many people demanding a dance-off to refuse. It starts with silly hand movements and halfhearted hip shakes, but then a full battle begins.

Sophia cheats, of course. She uses magic to levitate and blow everyone away. Which means I have to apologize for using her as a "human" shield during a rookie training exercise gone wrong.

By the end of the night, our kids have to be the real adults and make sure everyone travels home safely by magic. Gavin and I break free of Christine to run like drunk lunatics on the beach. She gives up and shouts something about us being lame just as her dad catches me.

He tackles me, but I land in the sand alone.

The beach goes silent. And dark.

A cloud of blue smoke lingers where my husband should be. And my child. They're just ... gone. For a wild moment, I become certain that I've made the last two years of my life up, and my daughter never came back to me. My husband never forgave me. I'm all alone, like I've been for years.

I wake with a gasp.

A scream wants to follow, but the arms around me make

the pieces of my life fall into place. My real life. It was just a dream.

I hope.

Gavin doesn't hog the covers. He hogs *me*. I can't sleep close enough for him. He will find a way to bring me closer, leg over mine, and suffocate me in his warmth. It's divine. The fact that I will have to leave this perfection to fight supernatural crime is a tragedy.

Many years ago, I almost let the world burn to stay with him like this, and I don't think I would make the right decision if I had to do it again.

It's almost 2 am, close enough to my normal waking time to be forced to start this day. I try to wiggle out of Gavin's arms without waking him, and failing miserably earns me the sweetest kiss. "You will be safe," he orders, voice hazy with sleep.

"I will be safe."

"You will come home."

"I will come home."

He raises my left hand to remove my rings like he's done every morning since the wedding. It's a hassle to clean them given my bloody line of work. But he stops and holds my hand up in the tiny space between us.

It's trembling.

My left hand has always gone nuts when I push my mind too far. It's my first sign to stop, rest. When we were younger, Gavin called it my *crazy hand* and would hold it all day to keep it calm. It's what brought us back together, actually. I came over to discuss Nathan's shifting problem, and Gavin noticed my spasming hand. And grabbed it.

The rest is history.

But ... it's shaking now for the first time in a year.

"What were you trying to see?" he asks. I don't have an

answer. At least, I don't want to have an answer. I *want* my dream to just be a dream and not my psychic brain warning me of terrors to come. "Is something wrong, Lyd?"

"No. I was just ... I was dreaming."

"About something bad?" he asks.

I kiss his nose. "It was just a dream." I have to believe that to stay on this side of sane.

"Maybe you need to rest. Stay—" He stops himself. We promised not to be our old selves this time around. He can't steal me away from the rest of the world, influence me to stay in bed to stare at each other all day. Among other things. We've forced ourselves to grow up. "I mean ... be careful, baby. If you need to stay home tonight and miss the—"

"I won't miss your concert."

"If you do, I won't be mad." He kisses me, drops my hand, and turns to his side. I watch as his breathing slows. I watch as his eyes shutter. I watch as he vanishes into a cloud of blue smoke.

A scream crawls its way up my throat, but before it gets out, Gavin returns. He's calm and sleeping like he never left. Because ... he never left. My mind is playing tricks on me. It's been a while, but I'm no stranger to a hallucination or two.

Still, I check on him between every stage of dressing for work. Once, twisted in my shirt like a pretzel, again with a toothbrush hanging out of my mouth. He's still sleeping when I emerge in my hunting uniform. Since my handsome man is safe and definitely not lost in a cloud of smoke, I make myself leave him.

Is Christine alone? I wonder. I become sure that she is, in fact, spending a rare night away from Nathan. I move myself to her door with a thought. While doing a courtesy

listen, Nathan is a huge blind spot in my visions after all, I hear footsteps in her studio.

I find her dancing around the room to a song she wrote with her dad. She has the most beautiful art in progress, landscape paintings and incredibly detailed portraits of us and her friends. As she uses a fine brush to add crinkles to the corners of her dad's eye, she disappears into a cloud of blue smoke.

I wait for the trick my mind has decided to play to end and for the world to make sense. And it does. Like she never missed a beat or a brush stroke, she's there painting again and dancing (rather clumsily), proving that I am once again going out of my mind.

CHAPTER TWO

I DON'T WANT to worry my daughter, and hiding anything from her these days is next to impossible, so I leave for work without saying goodbye. I picture the tiny apartment in my office that I keep primarily for mid-day mental breakdowns, and I'm there.

Before I can fully accept that I'm hallucinating, I give myself the benefit of the doubt and ask my brain an important question.

Is what I'm seeing, the blue smoke, a psychic vision?

Crickets. My powers don't reach an answer or a feeling or anything. It's like there's nothing to know. Nothing real to know, anyway.

"Sophia, *Gedesan*."

That word wraps around Sophia Ewing like a lasso and yanks her into the room, curled into the fetal position on the floor like she must've been in her bed.

Gedesan is my favorite word in any language. It summons my overpaid maid against her will. Bless the witch who put that collar-like spell on her many, many

years ago. Sometimes I use it to save my life. Often, I say it just to piss her off. But today ...

"I need..." It's hard to admit. I've been okay for so long now. It feels like failure to be back here, with scrambled eggs for a brain. "I'm seeing things."

"What kind of things?" Sophia asks, while standing with a surprising amount of speed for an ancient bag of bones.

"Just my family becoming smoke," I say. "No big deal." She notices my crazy hand and frowns. With a snap of her fingers, a tiny cup of meds appears with a bubbling tonic to wash them down with.

She offers them to me, but quickly snatches them back. "What color smoke?" she asks.

"Blue. Bright blue. Almost neon."

She hums. "Interesting. Christine mentioned blue smoke the other day." My heart squeezes. "I gave her tea, sneakily trying to turn her powers off to give her a break, and she asked me why the cup had blue smoke coming from it."

"Why would you not mention that?" I ask.

"Because it was the same day she kept getting startled by her own reflection. We had bigger issues. All this magic with Emma, you know how it's been hurting her. I figured it was just more of that."

With another snap, the meds and tonic vanish, and a white rose appears in their place. She spins the stem between her fingers. It continues going around on its own, hovering above her hands. "A little help," she says. I imagine the flower burning, and it ignites. As Sophia chants softly, images should appear in the flames. Sometimes they're from the immediate future. Sometimes she can see the past.

Today, we both see nothing but normal fire and a rose becoming ash.

“And your powers?” she asks.

“I’m getting nothing from just wondering about it. I need...”

“Christine and her younger, better mind,” she finishes. “But she’s setting fire to it daily with magic, so you’ll have to settle for Tyler and Iyana for now.”

We don’t waste the magic or psychic strength to find them. We walk through my personal gym, down a hallway made of mirrors, and through the secret door that leads to my official office.

The woman sitting at my desk doesn’t look up from her laptop. Iyana is pure muscle under six feet of deep chocolate skin, and absolutely no one is stupid enough to get on her bad side. When I retire, she will assume my official responsibilities of advising government heads and intelligence agencies. The stressful, human side of my job.

Tyler, who is standing facing a window while twirling his favorite knife, will become the Lead Agent. He will preside over hunters, the prison, and the Magical Council. Every morning, I expect them to beat me to work, sit where they’ll sit once I give them the keys to my kingdom, and know more than I do about literally everything.

“I’m seeing blue smoke, relating to my family. Figure out why.”

They glance at each other with matching smirks. For them, competition is lifeblood, and nothing pushes them like figuring something out faster than the other. Impressing me first. Only once has it gotten them in trouble. To enjoy a four-day honeymoon with Gavin, I left them in charge. They got so wrapped up in their rivalry that they missed a

witch breaking into my hotel room. She assumed I would have my guard down.

I had so much fun proving her wrong.

"Do it together," I order them. "No fighting. This feels ... serious."

I want to go home and watch my family without blinking, but I can't. I know I'll never get to the bottom of this mystery at home. Christine would catch on in a flash, use her compromised powers, and hurt herself. I can't have that.

So I call my friends. I've never had friends in my life before now. The Parentals, N'Kira (my former assistant) and her new "secret" boyfriend Devon (the head of Gavin's security detail and the first of my agents to know he existed). It feels weird loving people I'm not related to or toxically obsessed with. But one call is all it takes to get them to Puerto Rico in the middle of the night, to take turns watching my family sleep and discreetly patrol the area. They don't ask for details. They don't need them. All they know is that I want extra eyes and extra powerful hands around while I'm gone.

Sophia and Gregory get to work on finding references to bright blue smoke in magical texts. I'm certain about who will know the most about it, but I'm annoyingly forced to leave a message for the witches at St. Catalina to call me back. I spend hours in a dark room pushing my powers to tell me something, anything. Every second brings another wave of anxiety for me to drown in and another mental wall my mind can't get through.

With a thought, I move my phone across the room to my hand. It rings a second later. "What is it, Lydia Shaw?" the nun says, sounding bored enough to die from it.

"What do you know about blue smoke and people disappearing into it?"

"Please *do* call back when you have something more concrete than that." She's so ... I take a breath. I'm calling to ask yet another favor of this woman. The least I can do is stay calm.

"I saw Christine and her father disappear into smoke, blue smoke."

"That's ... troubling," she says, still seemingly bored. "Tell me, is she home when it happens in your visions? Something was able to reach her through my spells covering your house?"

"She was home. They both were."

Silence. A long, terrible silence.

"And it was blue," she says. "You're sure?"

"Certain." She sighs into the phone, mumbles for someone to leave her office. After another tense minute, she continues.

"Lydia, you're seeing something impossible. Something your eyes should be too small to see, and your brain too small to notice."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm not trying to offend you, child. An ant is profoundly knowledgeable about their ant hill and the grass surrounding it. But what if it needed to see the buttons on your shirt and comprehend why you have them?"

Ants and buttons? Jesus. My head is pounding.

"To some beings, you're an ant, Lydia. You can't comprehend the shape of them, the face of them, their buttons or why they have them. Your brain sees what it can. You're not the first to describe them as being ... blue and misty."

"Them?"

"Look up," she says. I do, to the dark ceiling in my office.

But I know what she means. Look up to the sky or ... *beyond* it.

“Gods?” I say. My hand goes wild.

“I would be happy to take custody of *our* child until you’re sure you can keep her safe,” she says. “Feel free to send her home.”

Home. Oh, I should ... no— I have bigger problems than slapping an ancient witch right now.

All known species in this world agree on one thing. We don’t mess with celestials or anything to do with them. Angels, demons, gods, it’s all a one-way ticket to nowhere good. So why are they planning to mess with me?

CHAPTER THREE

“GODS!”

Iyana bursts into my office ahead of Tyler, both of them panting.

“Boss, I think you’re seeing our brain’s manifestation of a celestial presence in this world,” Iyana says. “There’s a book in the Magical Council’s archive—”

I hold up a hand to stop her, then the book she’s about to mention from the archive. Her beautiful face falls. Tyler looks way too smug. I silently note that she beat him on this and send her to Amsterdam for meetings she should have no trouble running on her own. I send Tyler to Lisbon to retrieve a rogue agent who will undoubtedly try to kill him.

All of that will work out fine. I can see it clearly, unlike this problem threatening my family.

The book begins with a warning not to read any further. Toying with the gods, even speaking most of their names, is to be avoided at all costs. We could end up squashed under their feet if we lure them too close to the ant pile we call Earth. Of course, I keep reading.

The rest of the book contains spells to detect them,

summon them, and banish them. The detection spells seem simple enough for me to do them on my own without endangering Sophia and my other witchy friends. My father taught me a ton of magic. He became fascinated by it after spending his life despising witches. When he was very young, one killed his family and left him alone in the world. It made him a tyrant of a hunter. Then he met my mom, who, as a teenager, decided to go skiing with friends while the rest of her oil tycoon family flew on a private jet to the Bahamas. It fell from the sky. My dad was amazed that my mom didn't hate flying, nor did she devote her life to destroying all pilots. And he changed.

Which is why I'm able to follow the instructions to turn a crystal paperweight on my desk into a god detector.

I take it home. When I arrive in Puerto Rico, the sky is pitch black, and the house is empty.

They're all at the concert.

I can't help but feel foolish with how I'm holding the crystal thing in my outstretched hand, waiting for ... I don't know what. Until it glows.

Blue.

I turn around, checking behind me, to the side, every direction, and see nothing but the blue light in my hand. Its temperature spikes to searing, so I place it carefully on the kitchen counter. Light spreads from the crystal, flowing out like blue lava. It leaves a trail of blue marks in its wake. No, not just marks.

Handprints.

On the counter. The handles of everything. The faucet, the knobs. The light flows over the counter, across the floor, and up the fridge. It detects celestial prints all over it. They cover the flyer for Gavin's concert.

I walk slowly behind the creeping light as it forges a

path out of the kitchen to the living room. It highlights large sections of the sofa, the chairs, handprints on the walls, footprints on the floor. They lead to my room, and almost all of it glows blue.

Especially my bed.

“Sophia, Gede—”

“No,” I hear her scream in my mind. A moment later, my phone rings. “I’m at the concert that you’re late for, surrounded by people who shouldn’t see me disappear.” She hangs up.

Gavin’s concert.

Gavin.

My mind reaches out for information, but hits another mental wall. I push, asking those questions again and again. The strain of it sends blood trickling out of my nose. It feels like the answers are hidden behind such strong magic. This is ... so bad. Epically bad.

I push harder, and I pay the price in droves. Searing pain and whirling dizziness threaten to take me down. It feels like acid sloshing around my head. It takes everything not to scream, but soon I lose that battle. But I push still, and scream louder as blue light explodes behind my eyes. Then ... I see ... wings.

White wings. Hovering behind the love of my life.

No. This can’t...

I grab the molten crystal and take myself to Gavin’s concert before I can think it through. I race down hallways and past roadies and a room full of Gavin’s friends who flew in from Chicago. I run past stage equipment, jump over amps, and bump into people who notice me and bow.

I run until I’m backstage and staring at my husband’s back with a homemade god-finder burning my palm. It

glows blue, and as the light streaming from the crystal hits him, it leaves an outline of wings around him.

His same shape. His same body. With wings.

My eyes find Christine in the front row. She's in Nate's arms. The light streams toward her, too, but doesn't trace wings around her. It does, however, make her eyes glow with the faintest blue light.

In horror, I look at Gavin again just as he turns to look at me. A slow smile stretches across his beautiful face. I can't tell if he can see the blood leaking from my nose, or the tears streaming down my face, or if he has any idea what the contraption in my hands is. I can't tell anything at all, not with my vision blurring and the ground coming up to meet my head.

CHAPTER FOUR

I WAKE with a gasp in my bed. As usual, it doesn't feel real to be back in Puerto Rico with Gavin, in the house my mother bought us all those years ago. The world only consists of him for a minute. The tight embrace of his arms, his too-warm body nearly covering mine, his soap and his forgiveness and his peace. It's a drug, and I could wake up like this forever ...

Wake up.

Wake up?

I wasn't sleeping.

I was...

I try to sit up, but an arm closes around my waist. Gavin *tsks* in my ear. "You can't leave yet. I don't think it worked."

"What? I ... something is ..." Everything comes back to me. The glowing crystal, the concert, the wings. Celestial light all over this house. Coming from my child's eyes.

"Shhh," he says. I turn, suddenly terrified in his arms. And there's that smile again. The wicked one he flashed on stage. "Now, now. Relax, honey."

"Gav—"

"*Shh*. You'll just upset yourself." He kisses my nose, and as he pulls back, his eyes glow blue. I've looked into those eyes countless times. We've spent days in bed staring at each other, unable to do anything else. I toxically know every line in those eyes, every shade of brown present there.

Brown! Not blue. Not glowing.

"Soph—" Gavin kisses the corner of my mouth, and I lose the ability to speak. It just ... leaves me. Not in the usual way that this man makes my mind go blank. I. Can't. Form. Words.

I can't summon Sophia.

"None of that," he coos. A kiss to my forehead takes my psychic powers offline. I'm powerless and mute. Unfortunately, I was trained brutally for moments just like this. As much as I love Gavin, my natural reaction is to fight, but he's faster. He grabs my hand and brings it to his lips.

A kiss paralyzes my crazy hand.

And the rest of me.

"Believe it or not," he says, "This is your idea. You just don't remember."

He sits up and leaves me, a dead weight, on the bed.

"We're both too powerful for the mind games we like to play with each other," he says. "This little secret keeps popping up. You used to figure it out all the time when we were younger. Once a month or so."

It's a strange feeling to have my heart galloping in my chest and fear instructing every part of me to tremble, but not be able to move.

"To solve that problem," he says, his voice more musical than usual, "we tried wiping the knowledge from both of our brains. You slammed me into a tree during that time, so I went years detached from my true self."

He leans down, brushes a quick kiss on my forehead.

"I broke through your memory block, as you know, but not my own. Celestial magic is tricky like that. But ... our little *halfling* woke me up. The magic she's doing with Emma is changing her. She hugged me one day and ... something in me just shook, and I remembered myself. I also remembered how this triggers your anxiety more than anything, Lydia. All the worrying that someone will take me away, that I'll use my powers and cause a war with the gods, blah blah blah. Or worse, wake my mom. So I just ... decided to keep you in the dark about it. It's better this way. You'll see."

He reaches a glowing hand toward me. The edges of my vision turn blue and then black, and then ... nothing exists at all.



I wake slowly, gently drifting up from sleep in a room I'll never get used to waking up in. My bedroom in Puerto Rico. *Home*.

I raise my hands to my face and count my fingers forward and backward. I'm never able to do that in dreams. But I can now. I'm really awake this time. And that nightmare ... God. Just thinking about it makes my left hand tremble.

My mind tells me it's 9 pm.

We had a dinner party tonight to celebrate the first stop of Gavin's tour. After it, he and I crawled into bed to rest before his sound check, and apparently, my brain decided to have nightmares wrapped in nightmares.

I roll over to wake Gavin, but he's bathed in light, already awake and scrolling on his phone. He hears me, and as he turns his head in my direction, fear churns in my stom-

ach. What if everything I saw was real? Gavin exhales slowly.

"Hey, babe." He sounds sad.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

I'm nervous.

I can hear his thoughts. That's a great sign that he's the same Gavin I've always known. Not a Gavin with freaking wings and cataclysmic powers.

"I'm just nervous," he whispers, turning off his screen and that terrifying light. He stares at the ceiling fan as it makes its rounds. "What if I forget the words? Or my stutter comes back? Or if I just look like an old fool who made an album that no one cares about, and they boo me off stage?"

He covers his face. He's wearing his wedding band and Chrome Hearts rings on each thumb.

"I should cancel," he says. "I'll *cancel*. That's what I'll do. I'm a background guy. Why would a background guy be headlining a tour?"

I reach for his face, wedging my hand under his. He peeks at me through his fingers. With brown eyes. *Brown*. Thank God.

"Gav, you're on tour because you had a successful album. People love it. And you. And you sold out every show. Your fans want to see you."

"I sold out teeny tiny venues. It's not a big deal at all."

"It's a big deal to you. That's why you're nervous." I kiss his hands until he pulls them down, and kiss him some more.

"You're ... sweaty," he says, swiping his hand across my neck. "Why? It's freezing in here."

"Nightmare."

He pulls me deeper into his arms, smooths my hair down, kisses me again. "What was it about?" he asks.

"I ... well ..." My heart begins to pound, and my crazy hand goes wild. Here it is. If it wasn't a dream, and I prove my mind isn't successfully wiped, he will turn into that scary person again.

He notices my hand then and plants kisses on my palm. It stops shaking.

"What was it, Lyd?"

Here goes nothing.

"I dreamed you were really a god. Or some kind of celestial being. It could've also been an angel. Wings were involved. I read once that angels are basically demoted gods, so..."

Silence.

More silence.

He tilts my head up and forces our eyes to meet. They are still brown. "A *god*?" he says, and laughs way too hard. "Wow. That's not something you tend to call me when we're fully clothed."

"Gavin! Don't joke. It was terrifying!"

"I'm sure it was."

I tell him about him paralyzing my crazy hand with a kiss, and he laughs so hard he shakes up phlegm. The part about Christine awakening his god powers with a hug turns the cackle into a quiet, never-ending wheeze. I try halfheartedly to push him away. Instead, he pulls me closer and buries his face in my hair to catch his breath.

"Okay, okay," he says. "This is serious. You had a bad dream. Let's stay in bed and hide from everything until you feel better."

Oh, that would be nice. But...

"You're not getting out of the concert."

"It was worth a shot, tiny human woman," he says, in a forcibly deep and comically godly voice.

We go from laughing to kissing and back again, huddled under our worn bird blanket like a fort, until Sophia ruins everything with her presence. Christine hops in behind her and reminds us not to be gross.

So we get up to start our night. It's another perfect one with the usual amount of interruptions from my job. I make it back in time to hear Gavin's last song, dedicated to me.

He sings about this life of ours that's wonderful and real. Something in me wants to question it. Make a problem where there's none and be afraid of it all ending. But that's all in my head.

Right?

THE END