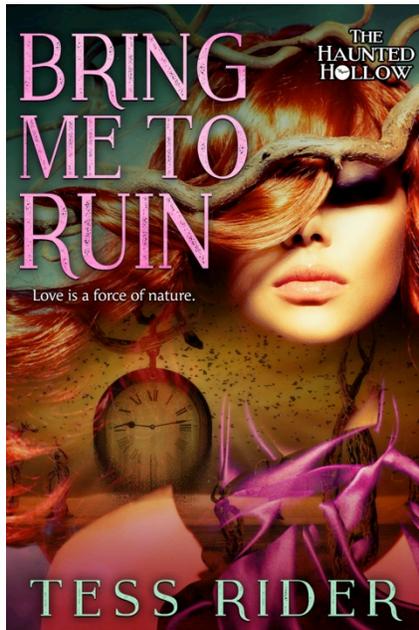


Sample Chapter

Bring Me to Ruin

Tess Rider



CHAPTER ONE

November 1, 1969 —Radley's Hollow, California

Thea, wherever you are, find me!

"Huh?" Thea Maloney jerked alert at the sound of the voice. His voice. The voice she was never going to hear again. Despite the loud music and crash of chatter all around her, she'd obviously managed to fall into some kind of stupor, but it didn't help that all she dreamed of was him. With renewed vigor, she smacked her shot glass down on the bar's countertop. "Another!"

Blues thundered from the musicians onstage. A thick lick, the bass a driving rhythm, the drums relentless, the guitar screaming. A cover of Nina Simone's profound "Sinnerman." It had been Gerard's favorite song.

Milton Coleridge walked toward her, wiping his hands on an already wet bar towel. He couldn't get to her fast enough. She wanted another drink. Now. Before even the slightest hint

of her raging drunk wore off. The music egged her on. Gerard had loved playing this tune. He could wail on the guitar like he was down on his knees, praying to God. *Lord, save me.*

But He hadn't. Nope. God had remained determinedly quiet when it came to Gerard's life and just as silent on the topic of his death.

"That's number five, Thea," Cole said, "in less than an hour."

"I know. I know. I said I'd pace myself." She swallowed hard. "It's just, I can't... It won't stop...this ringing in my head. Ever since he..."

Thea reached over the counter and grabbed the closest liquor bottle, some cheap vodka.

A vise clamped over her hand. Cole stared her down, his storm-dark gray eyes locked onto hers. "I'll toss you out of here if you try that again."

"You'd just kick me out on a day like today? Really?" She couldn't stop her lower lip from trembling. Goddammit, she wanted that next shot, but she slunk her way back over the bar and hunched on her stool. She swiped at a single tear that dared to leak from her eye. *No tears*, he'd told her the last time they spoke. *Not for me. Get on with your life.* Ha! Like that was even possible. He had been her life. Her best friend since childhood. The orphaned boy her family had taken in. The kid she'd built forts with and raced bicycles with. The teenager who taught her how to fight back and the reckless fool who'd gotten himself mixed up with a rich girl, a rich girl who ended up murdered. Guess who took the fall? Eight long years of trying to prove his innocence while he toiled away doing hard labor at San Quentin. Eight years of her life lost to a fight she could never win. His life over. Done. Gone. A lonely word, gone. Like watching the chamber fill up with gas, amorphous, deadly. And then he's gone. Dead. Murdered by the state for a crime he did not commit. "Cole, please, just one more. I'm desperate here. It's all I see now when I close my eyes. Last night at the prison."

Cole leaned over the counter, tugging her into a hug. He kissed her hair like a father might. He smelled of aftershave and coffee. For a barman, he rarely drank alcohol. The rough grit of his tweed vest scratched her cheek but she didn't let go of him. The woolly scent and texture comforted somehow. Grounded her. No matter what, despite everything that had happened, she still had him.

"I know, my girl. I know," Cole said, voice gentle. "I know how much you loved him."

"Love," she said, pulling back. "Love. Present tense. Just because he's dead doesn't mean I stop loving him. I don't think I'll ever stop loving him."

And again she swiped at her cheeks, both of them this time, at those damned tears. If she let them fall, then nothing would stop them from drowning her.

"I'm sorry you never got to hear him say it to you, but he did love you, you know. Very much."

Thea's breathing hitched involuntarily. She pressed a hand to her chest, right over her heart, where pain as fierce as a heart attack raged.

"Not like I loved him," she finally managed. "I've always been his 'little sister.'"

Cole raised a thick, black eyebrow. "You're wearing his dad's old bomber jacket. Don't you remember when he got old enough to wear it he swore he'd give it to the girl he intended to marry?"

"Cole, don't. He gave me the jacket when he went to prison. He said he wanted someone he knew well to have it. He never said he was in love with me. Ever." Thea swiped

hard at her eyes. Damned leaking eyes. Despite how she downplayed Gerard's gift, she tugged the jacket tighter around her, the only piece of him she had left.

"And you've been wearing that thing like a uniform ever since." While they'd been talking, Cole'd been mixing up a drink for her, something with cucumber and muddled mint and no alcohol. He poured it into a tall glass, garnished it with an umbrella and a cucumber wedge, then slid it across the counter to her.

"Cole," she said, unable to hold back the whine. "Please don't make me sober up tonight. Please. I need to forget for just a little while. I need to feel numb. I can't stand this...this God-aw-ful hole in my heart."

Someone nearby heard her swear and turned. The large, well-endowed empress of the local eatery, Lulu Carmichael, sidled over and slung her arm around Thea's shoulder. She squeezed her hard while precious vodka and cranberry sloshed out of her cocktail glass. Cole shook his head and moved on to serve other thirsty customers.

"Sweetheart! This is a shit day. I'm so very sorry you have to go through this. He was a good boy, deep down. And everyone here in this bar knows it or we wouldn't be here. The rest of town can go to Hell for all I care. You poor thing. What you've been through all these years, and for it to come to this. Darling, if there's anything I can do for you, you just let me know."

"I could really use a sip of your drink." Thea reached up, snagged the glass out of Lulu's hand and took a giant gulp of the cosmopolitan. Please, please, let it numb this ache and the noise in her head and all those vicious, creeping, crawling doubts. She hadn't worked hard enough, diligently enough, relentlessly enough to solve Katerina Rutherford's murder. Gerard's death really was all Thea's fault. She should have pushed harder. She should have...but what stone hadn't she unturned in every single corner of Radley's Hollow?

There had been one. A stone so large she'd need an act of God to move it. And it sat at the very end of Main Street like a palace at the end of a long road, a *la Versailles*. The Radley Mansion and the untouchables who lived within.

"Thanks, I needed that." Thea handed Lulu her drink. "I'd bet my life Irene Radley had something to do with what happened to Gerard."

Lulu took a sip of the drink and then returned it to Thea. "The woman is known to dabble in black magic. Here, you need this more than me, girlfriend."

Lulu grabbed onto the counter for support as she wobbled. "I don't go in for that hocus-pocus stuff, but in her case, I'd bet a whole month's take at the cafe that she's a witch. An evil, nasty witch."

Thea had lived in Radley's Hollow all her life and knew that the ghost stories folks told kids to get them to eat their vegetables had more than a little truth to them. And there was definitely something strange about the matriarch of Radley's Hollow. Irene Radley had ruled the town and the Radley family for over sixty years and yet didn't look a day over forty.

"You do know everyone here loves you, right, Thea?" Lulu asked, patting her comfortingly on the shoulder.

Great. Another big lump formed in her throat. She nodded, wordless. Nothing was enough to silence the deafening scream in her head, the sound she'd wanted to make when they'd released the gas. Scream and bash the guard away from the button that killed her best friend in the entire world. She'd wanted to scream like a banshee to high heaven, wreaking vengeance for Gerard's wrongful death. Scream so loud God would finally hear her.

But she'd been mute. Not a peep left her lips from the moment she'd filed into the viewing stands. Viewing stands! Because a state execution required witnesses. And because the family of the victim wanted to see justice done. It had been all she could do to keep from leaping over the chairs and throttling Peter Rutherford's arrogant, sly neck. Thea had gone to school with both Katerina and her brother Peter. She knew Peter well enough to hate every inch of him. He hadn't stopped looking at her during the entire, horrific process of putting a man to death in a "humane" fashion, that snide smirk on his handsome face.

"I know, Lulu. Thank you for saying it." Thea drank down the rest of Lulu's drink, despite Cole's hearty frown from across the bar.

"You know I loved that boy like a son," Lulu said over the thrum of the crowd and the blasting blues. "Lots of us here did."

Thea nodded as she stared into the empty glass. She couldn't speak over the boulder in her throat.

"Tragically, no amount of our love was ever enough. Poor boy. Poor, dear boy." Lulu took a hanky from the pocket of her blue apron. No matter she was at a memorial on her day off, Lulu always wore that apron, little brass first place winner pins glinting like badges of honor across the top, reminding everyone in town exactly who she was—the best damn cook in the whole county. Gerard had practically lived at her cafe come mealtimes, if he wasn't at Thea's mom's table. Lulu dabbed at her eyes.

Thea shuddered, a prickle running down her spine. She sat up straighter and turned to the saloon doors. The two old-fashioned shutters flapped with a familiar slap whenever someone came in from outside. They clacked now as a group of hulking men, once the town's revered high school football players, now large, no-neck bullies, filed into the bar. Thea's jaw dropped.

The whole room went dead quiet. Even the musicians stopped playing as everyone in the entire bar turned to stare at the newcomers.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" asked the leader of the pack, blond, handsome, arrogant, son of a bitch Peter Rutherford. "A memorial for a murderer."

"You shut the hell up and get the hell out of this bar now!" Thea leaped from her stool.

"Or you'll do what?" Peter smirked.

Thea lunged and swung her fist into his face.

Peter ducked at the last second and laughed. "Loyal to that killer to the end, eh, Thea?"

"Hey, asshole, we're all loyal to Gerard," someone shouted from the crowd. Others joined in the grumblings and a number of the bar's regulars got to their feet and moved toward the unwelcome newcomers.

"Westies don't belong here," Thea growled, itching to plow her fist into the face of the pretty boy from the west end of town, the *rich* end of town. "Not tonight."

"My sister has finally been vindicated." Peter poked his finger in Thea's face. "And there's no way on God's green earth my family will allow any kind of celebration of that bastard who murdered her."

She stepped right up to him. "Try that again and I'll break your finger. Get out now while you can still walk."

"Is that a threat, little Miss Thea?" Peter asked with that goddamned snide smile.

“No, gentlemen, I’m the threat,” Cole said, his voice ringing through the room, silencing everyone. “Your great-aunt doesn’t own a speck of dirt or a single nail of my bar. If you’d bothered to read the sign outside, you’d have noticed this is a private party for the friends and family of Gerard Wyatt. You are not welcome.”

“And none of us are going to stand for you muscling your way in here after your family just railroaded Gerard into the gas chamber!” Thea shouted into Peter’s face, so loud he flinched.

“That’s right!” More men stepped forward from the tables and dance floor. On stage, Ted, the bassist, and the drummer, Big Al, put down their instruments and hustled down the stage steps.

“Last chance.” Thea tasted the tension in the air and it lit her up like a match to kerosene.

“Screw. You.” Peter snarled.

Fury consumed her. Thea smashed Peter’s face with a surprise left hook and followed it with a powerful undercut to his jaw with her right. Peter staggered backwards, blood pouring from his nose.

The bar exploded in violence.

Thea threw herself into the melee of flying fists, crashing furniture, and blood splatter. She didn’t care who she punched or kicked, so long as it was a Westie. It was the only way to truly dull the pain. Pain that radiated from her heart, along every nerve, through every cell, haunting every breath. Pain that never went away. It hadn’t been Peter’s fault Gerard was executed. It had been hers. She’d failed to prove him innocent. No matter that she played God in the historical mystery novels she wrote, all her years of relentless investigation into Katerina’s murder hadn’t yielded enough evidence to save Gerard. She should have worked harder, done more, dug deeper... Now all she could do was make sure she honored Gerard’s memory with every punch she threw. The battle became a blur of adrenaline and action and blessedly nothing else, not even physical pain. She was lost to the violent storm, no past, no future, only the now.

A pair of arms swept around Thea’s midsection from behind and hauled her kicking and screaming from the fight.

“You. Need. To. Calm. Down.” Milton Coleridge’s voice, as deep and dark as any nightmare, sliced through sound and time.

Thea landed with a thud on a bar stool, a cup of coffee shoved into her hand.

“Drink this,” Cole said. “And take a couple of deep breaths.”

Thea did as instructed, gulping coffee and breathing in between the gulps. Slowly the rush of the fight faded and she could think again. She took several more deep breaths and registered Cole on the other side of the bar glaring at her, his normally gray eyes an eerie pitch black. And then, as her heartbeat stopped thundering in her ears, she noticed the complete lack of sound. Chills trickled down her spine like sweat. She gulped more coffee and looked around.

Everything was frozen.

Peter and his asshole friends were in the middle of getting the shit kicked out of them by Cole’s regulars, only they all stood poised like Greek statues, fists frozen in the middle of a strike, legs extended mid-kick. Droplets of blood hung suspended in the air like gory rain.

The rest of the bar was as creepy and quiet as a wax museum after hours, everyone in a frozen state of fixation, stares glued to the brawl. Even Lulu stood gape-jawed and motionless, fists raised in the air in silent solidarity with her fellow bar mates.

The only two people apparently still capable of movement were Thea and Cole.

*

Thea was out cold. She had to be. That was the only explanation for this. Knocked out by one of Peter's obnoxious friends, no doubt. This was a dream.

"It's not a dream," Cole said, though his unnatural black eyes begged to differ.

"Then what's wrong with your eyes and why can you hear what I'm thinking?" Thea kept looking around at the impossible scene. So eerie. So quiet. So wrong. "This is clearly a dream."

"No, Thea. Deep down, I think you've always known there is something different about me." Cole planted both hands on the bar's countertop, the off-white sleeves of his button-down shirt bunched up at his elbows. He leveled her a serious stare.

Thea returned his stare. She and Gerard had practically grown up in this bar. Not that Cole would ever serve them. They'd sat at the end of the bar drinking soda pop and listened for hours to Cole's tall tales about a mad witch from the hollow and her army of ghosts that threatened to wipe out humanity. Had all of Cole's crazy stories been something more? Thea had no doubt Irene Radley possessed some sort of dark power that defied everything Thea had grown up believing about the natural world. This frozen time thing, this was something on a whole new level of unbelievable and the only possible explanation was that someone had knocked her out. It was the only thing that still made sense.

"I am a time mage," Cole said, as casually as if he'd said he was a bartender. "I control time. And I've paused it for everyone here except you and me."

Thea shook her head. The room spun around her. She had to be passed out drunk on the barroom floor. She only hoped her body wasn't being trampled on in the fight. What she needed to do was wake up. She pinched herself and squeaked at the pain. Nothing around her changed.

"I am sorry, my dear, that I've had to reveal this to you so suddenly. You gave me no choice. This drunken brawl? This isn't you. What are you trying to do? Do you think it will bring you any closer to him?"

Pain shot through her chest like a bullet. She clutched it and fought the urge to burst out bawling. Yes! Yes, she wanted more than anything to be closer to Gerard, to see him again, to hear his big laugh and stay up late at night talking about anything and everything under the sun...but he'd shut her out of his life by the time they put him to death, telling her she needed to get on with hers. How was she supposed to do that without him?

"Ironically," Cole said when she didn't respond verbally, "I'm out of time. I need your help, Thea. The future needs your help. And you very much need mine."

His tense eyebrows softened, lessening the severity of his sharp, dark looks. He had thick black hair, a compact, muscular build, and was always dressed in a gentleman's clothing, tailored suits, fine shirts, bowler or top hat to complete his look, depending on his mood. He usually wore the bowler to the bar, but for tonight, he had on his fine wool top hat. It made him seem even taller than normal, more commanding, like the de facto leader of the East Enders that he was.

Katerina's murder and the subsequent witch hunt for Gerard had divided the town into two camps, the line drawn strictly down the railroad tracks that bisected town, Westies and their big, fancy houses on one side, the East Enders in their modest homes, farmhouses and shacks on the other. This fight tonight wasn't the first to break out over the issue and it sure wouldn't be the last. This battle just might tear the whole town apart. If Cole was imparting wisdom to her via some sort of outrageous scenario only a dreaming mind could come up with, she'd better listen.

"I'm still not convinced this is anything more than a dream and you're about to tell me one of your tall tales, but I'll bite. Start by telling me how you *froze time*." Thea folded her arms across her chest.

"I didn't freeze time, not like you think. We're in a temporal bubble within the space of a millisecond. For a short time, I can hold us here while nothing more than a fraction of a blink of an eye goes by to everyone else. I should be able to hold a temporal bubble indefinitely, but something happened last night when Gerard was executed. Time...broke. And so did my connection to it. It's why I need your help."

"How on Earth do you break time? I don't get it. You mean the past got changed somehow?"

"Far worse, I'm afraid," he said. "Time was shattered, like a mirror shatters into a thousand splinters, every shard containing different possibilities, different timelines, different outcomes. And I have shattered with it, in a sense. I've lost all connection to my other selves in the space/time continuum."

"Excuse me?" Thea scratched her head.

"My race's *raison d'être* since time began has been to protect the integrity of time, in part because we have the ability to see all of time all at once. But now it's as if I have temporal amnesia. The past, present and future have been jumbled up, splinters have formed, dark spots blot out my memory. My power over time is being leached away."

"And this all happened last night when they executed Gerard?"

Cole nodded. "At the very moment he died."

"You did look pretty upset last night after we left the prison, but I guess we all were. I didn't think it was anything more than that."

"Last night I had no way to articulate what was happening to me. I was in too much shock and pain to understand it myself. It wasn't until I got back here to my rooms upstairs that things became clear. I had a visitor. A very peculiar visitor who knew all about the broken timelines. This person told me about the rise of a mad witch named Scheherazade, who lives in the heart of the hollow, spewing evil into all the broken timelines, leading the whole planet to a fate not even I can prevent. My visitor told of a safe haven almost one hundred and eighty years in the future, a place outside of time, in a bubble much like this one, only it holds an entire community. They are called the League of the Helping Hand and they're the last bastion of humanity fighting against Scheherazade and her nightmare army of ghosts and demons—"

"Wait." Thea held up her hand. "Wait. I know this story. It's the one you've been telling for years."

"No, Thea, I haven't. I've never told that story before." Cole's dark gaze didn't shift or waver.

“But I remember...” The image of Cole in his top hat and tails at the Halloween festival every year flickered like an old movie film, grainy and dim. He gestured as his voice boomed over the crowd of children gathered close. A delicious chill of fear skated down her spine as much as any child’s... Only Cole’s image began to fade. The children disappeared one by one and Cole’s words slowed down like a 45 rpm record played at 33, distorted, unintelligible...then gone.

“Okay, this is really starting to freak me out.” Thea gulped down more coffee. “This had better be a damned hallucination, because if you’ve had power over time, then why the hell didn’t you use it to save Gerard?”

“Oh my dear, do you not see the very moral quandary of your request? If I were to change the past in Gerard’s favor, why shouldn’t I change others?”

“I don’t know, why not?” she challenged, chin raised, foolish, childish hope blossoming in her heart.

Cole shook his head. “What you are asking is to fold time. All time. And that, I believe, may be what got us into this predicament in the first place. Someone found a way to twist time to their own whim. I only wonder if the culprit knew the damage they would unleash.”

“Right, this giant ghost war you mentioned.” Thea rubbed her temples vigorously, vodka, coffee, and the aftereffects of the fist fight doing battle in her head. That and Cole’s monumental confession.

“Not just that, Thea. When time is folded, the entire Universe can be drawn backwards, depending on how significant the fold. This bubble I’ve created has a limited range of effectiveness that doesn’t go beyond this saloon. The bigger the fold, the more of space and time are drawn into it. And that means nothing’s guaranteed to go the same way again. This planet already owes its existence to a miraculous string of events on the universal scale. Turn back time and you could change the location of a star or the path of a comet or send our planet on a collision course with a black hole.”

“I...see... So are you saying one or more of the above is happening?”

“I believe so, yes. You see, I am the only time mage currently in existence. There were others...but they’ve long since passed.” Cole’s face clouded over for a moment. Then it cleared and he looked at her. “This visitor yesterday told me someone is trying to kill me in order to take control of time, perhaps even to deliberately destroy it.”

“Cole, I write mysteries for a living, but I’m no detective. Look how miserably I failed...” Goddamn that lump in her throat. “I don’t know why you’d want my help. I don’t even know how I could possibly help you, assuming this is all real.”

“That’s just it, my dear. *You* were my visitor last night. That is, a version of you from the future.”

“Me? Time traveling from the future? How in the world would I even be able to do that when I’m sitting right here?”

“She, the you of the future, that is, had only enough energy to remain in this timeline long enough to warn me someone is trying to kill me throughout time and to tell me I need to send you to 2147 to this league I mentioned to solve the mystery. She gave me very specific temporal coordinates.”

“Wait just a second. *What* did you say? You want me to go to the twenty-second century and solve your attempted murder? Are you out of your mind?” Thea smacked her

forehead. "No, clearly, I'm out of mine. I've gone over the edge. It's all been too much. The not sleeping, the constant work, losing him... It's finally gone and pushed me over the edge."

"Regrettably, I fear we also have little time, Thea. If I fall in this future she told me about, the safe haven will be destroyed and the witch Scheherazade will bring her nightmares to this reality. Your family, your friends, everything you still do love about Radley's Hollow will be brought to ruin."

"Did you not hear me? I'm a failure when it comes to saving anybody! I shouldn't be doing anything other than crawling under a rock and never coming out again."

Cole softened. "She said you'd doubt your abilities. But I don't and neither did she. She said you need this mission."

"The *she* in question being me. From the future. This is completely insane."

"Or it's exactly what you need."

"Still not convinced," Thea said.

"There is one other piece of information your future self imparted to me. There is a leader of this league I mentioned. They call him the General. He and his ghost hunters have conducted the only successful guerrilla resistance against the witch and her undead army. It's thanks to him there are any humans alive in the future."

"He sounds like a hero. What's it got to do with me?"

"He is another version of Gerard from a different timeline."

Noise rushed through her ears. Her heart kicked in her chest. "He's another version...?"

She couldn't even finish the sentence. Hope blossomed like a flower unfurling in the sun. She stamped it down. This was a dream! And it had just turned into a nightmare. Hope had kept her putting one foot in front of the other these past eight years. Hope that she'd crack Gerard's case. Hope that she'd save him. Hope that he'd finally look at her like she'd seen him look at so many other girls, that he'd finally see her as more than just his best friend. Hope needed to die and stay dead. As dead as Gerard was. This was a cruel trick of her subconscious to play, dangling this dangerous possibility in front of her. How in the hell was she supposed to say no to the chance to see Gerard alive again?

"The General is not the boy you knew," Cole added. "He's only known the violence and deprivation of the ghost war his entire life. He's a fighter to the core. Your future self warned me he may well be the one who finally tips the scales in the wrong direction. She said only you can stop him."

"Did my future self happen to mention exactly how I'm supposed to stop a career guerrilla soldier I've never met and who doesn't know me from a lamppost?"

"Yes," Cole said. "She said you must teach him how to love."

"What? I know nothing about time travel and even less about love. I can't believe future me ever thought I was the right candidate for this insane mission."

"Perhaps future you has learned a thing or two and knows you need to go on this journey."

"Perhaps..." The allure of seeing Gerard again, no matter what new name he went by, tingled through her body. The rightness of it contrasted with the madness of the entire proposal. So she was in some kind of coma from a brutal knockout in the fight or Cole's powers and stories were true. She had to make a choice. In the end, it was an easy one.

Thea, wherever you are, find me!

"I'll go." Even as she said the words, electricity zinged through her. Hope. That damnable hope that flooded her body with energy. "How do we do this?"

"I have enough power left that I can send you to the coordinates she gave me. She said to trust only your Aunt Tempe. She'll look out for you and get you up to speed."

"Wait a minute, you mean Aunt Temperance? My dad's twin? She died when they were teens."

"You will be going to a place full of refugees from all the broken timelines where things happened differently. There will be familiar faces."

"Even you? Will you know me?"

Cole shook his head. "I don't know. She really had very little time to share much with me, for reasons I can only assume you'll soon discover. And now you must go, Thea. My powers are fading fast and I need the rest of them to send you."

For the first time, Thea noticed the dark circles under Cole's eyes, the lines and creases in the flesh around them, around his mouth and his forehead. He looked older, less vigorous and vital than his normal self.

She reached out to him. "Cole, what's going to happen to you here?"

"All that matters is your mission. Find out what's happened to me in the future and stop the General from making a terrible mistake. Goodbye, Thea, and may the gods be with you."

"That's it? That's all the prep I get? What about saying goodbye to my—"

In the blink of an eye, Thea stood in pitch darkness. She laughed, about to tell Cole to turn the lights back on, when a blinding spotlight caught her full in the face. She blinked, trying to see, no longer laughing. A massive, iron-studded door embedded in rock blocked the way forward. Darkness and complete silence lurked behind her.

He'd done it! Cole had really done it. But where on Earth was she? As her eyes adjusted to the light she looked around. Thick wooden beams, spaced several feet apart, supported the jagged, rocky walls and ceiling of a tunnel and disappeared into the darkness behind her. A cold shiver shook her from head to toe. She had a feeling she knew where she was. She was standing on the wrong side of the massive cellar door to the Radley Winery.

Long ago, for an unknown reason, someone had bored a shaft from the winery on its hilltop down to the vast labyrinth of tunnels under Radley's Hollow. The tunnels belonged to the long-abandoned Radley Mine. No one went into the mine. Ever. On the cellar side, this door had been sealed behind brick reinforced with rebar. She only knew what the door looked like from her extensive research into Radley's Hollow history for her mystery novels.

Thea gulped as she reviewed her options. They were limited. Option one, turn around and head into the darkness. A cold sweat broke over her at the idea. These tunnels were the only part of Radley's Hollow she and Gerard hadn't explored, with good reason. They'd grown up on stories of lost miners, flooding, collapses and cave-ins, and the unearthly sound of moaning that came from the sealed entrance shaft in the east hollow when the wind was still. No, she'd very much like to avoid getting lost in a maze of pitch black tunnels.

That left option two. Knock on the giant door and pray to anyone willing to listen that there was someone on the other side to open it.

"Greetings, trespasser." A male voice shattered the silence.

Or there was option number three.

“This gateway is armed with poison gas lethal to humans, grotesques, banshees, creepers, phantom raiders, faetals and any other entity, being or demon, living, dead or undead. Identify yourself immediately or you will be terminated.”

~ * ~

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