



Daybridge Necropolis: Where Shadows Keep Their Secrets

The Dead Are Restless

Welcome to *Daybridge Necropolis: Where Shadows Keep Their Secrets*. Detective Ethan Reeves thought he'd seen the worst Daybridge had to offer. He was wrong.

When a necromancer raises an army of the undead, Ethan must unleash the monster within—before the city becomes a graveyard.

Turn the page. The darkness is waiting.

— **Rae Stonehouse - Author**

THE ETHAN REEVES WEREWOLF DETECTIVE SERIES

Detective Ethan Reeves hides a supernatural secret: he's a werewolf. His heightened senses help him solve cases others can't—but his dual nature may be his greatest liability.

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CHAPTER ONE FREE SAMPLE

Book Two in the Ethan Reeves Werewolf Detective Series

PROLOGUE: Echoes

Prague, Czech Republic

December 21, 1994

3:17 AM

The candles didn't flicker when Abby died.

Lila remembered that detail later — how the flames stood perfectly motionless, as if time itself held its breath while her sister's life slipped away. The chalk circles etched meticulously across the stone floor glowed with an unnatural silver light, arcane symbols pulsing in rhythmic patterns like heartbeats independent of the ritual participants. Her sister's body lay at the center, pale and

still, surrounded by ancient grimoires bound in materials Lila preferred not to identify, their yellowed pages containing desperate hopes transcribed by generations of seekers.

"Again," Viktor whispered, his hands slick with Abby's blood as he adjusted the ceremonial dagger at the ritual's focal point. His aristocratic features were taut with concentration, dark eyes reflecting the eerie silver glow from the activating sigils. "The resonance is building. I can feel the dimensional thinning. One more push and we'll breach the veil between--"

"She's gone." Lila's voice cracked, the cold certainty of death overwhelming the academic detachment she'd maintained throughout their preparations. The power hummed through her bones like electrical current, dark and seductive in its promise, but Abby's hand was cold and lifeless in hers. "We failed."

"No." Viktor's eyes blazed with that terrible certainty she'd once found mesmerizing — the unwavering conviction that had drawn her into esoteric studies at the University of Prague five years earlier. "We're close. I can feel it. The boundaries between life and death are thin here, especially tonight. The winter solstice creates a natural dimensional alignment. We just need--"

"Viktor." Her tears fell on the meticulously drawn chalk lines, breaking their perfect geometry as the droplets carried her grief into the ritual space. "Please."

He knelt beside her then, setting aside the ceremonial implements to gather her into his arms. His heartbeat was too fast against her cheek, fever hot with the energies they'd channeled. "We knew there would be sacrifices, my love. For power like this -- for the ability to reach beyond conventional boundaries--"

"Not her." Lila clutched Abby's lifeless hand, still warm but rapidly cooling as whatever essence had made her sister laugh, dream, and love departed for realms they'd foolishly thought they could access through academic study and ritualistic precision. "It was supposed to save her. That's why we started this research in the first place."

The candles remained unnaturally still, their flames like painted images rather than living fire. In their unnatural light, shadows moved wrong -- stretching and contracting against the ancient stone walls of Viktor's family estate, reaching with hungry, elongated fingers toward the failed ritual's remnants. Toward Abby's cooling body.

"We can try again." Viktor's voice held that edge of obsession she'd been too desperately in love to fear until this moment. His fingers trembled as they brushed hair from her tear-stained face. "There are other ways. Darker paths we haven't explored. The Moravian grimoire mentions techniques that could--"

"No." Lila pulled away, the silver rings on her fingers -- family heirlooms inscribed with protective sigils passed through generations of her Romanian ancestors -- burning unnaturally cold against her skin. "This ends here."

His laugh held no humor, a brittle sound that echoed strangely in the ritual chamber. "Ends? My love, this is only the beginning. What we've learned, what we've opened -- the resonances are established now. They won't simply dissipate because we walk away."

The shadows lengthened further, stretching across the floor like grasping hands. The candlelight dimmed incrementally, as if something unseen were feeding on its illumination. And in that moment, as her sister's soul slipped finally, irrevocably into darkness beyond their reach, Lila Darkmagic made a choice that would define the remainder of her existence.

She placed her silver-ringed hand on the primary containment sigil, channeling her grief, rage, and newfound determination into its structure. The symbol flared brilliantly, then inverted its energy pattern -- converting from summoning to banishing, from invitation to severance.

"What are you doing?" Viktor's voice rose in alarm as the ritual energies they'd so carefully cultivated began to dissipate. "You can't just--"

"Watch me," she whispered, her voice finding new strength in opposition to the man she'd once believed would help her save her sister from terminal illness. "Some doors should remain closed, Viktor. Some knowledge isn't meant for human minds to comprehend or control."

As the protective circles collapsed inward, Viktor lunged for the central grimoire -- the ancient text that had led them down this dangerous path with its promises of transcending death itself. His fingers closed around its leather binding just as Lila completed the containment inversion.

The resulting energetic backlash threw them both against opposite walls of the chamber. When Lila regained consciousness minutes later, Viktor was gone -- along with the grimoire and several key ritual components. Only Abby's body remained, peaceful now that the unnatural energies had dissipated, looking almost as if she might be sleeping.

But the shadows still moved wrong in the corners of the chamber, suggesting that while their ritual had failed in its intended purpose, it had succeeded in opening something that would not be easily closed again.

The price of that night would echo through decades, following Lila across continents and through years of atonement and preparation for what she knew would eventually come.

Present Day

Daybridge City

October 31

2:13 AM

The body on Medical Examiner Choy's table had no marks. No wounds. No trauma that modern science could identify as a cause of death.

But its shadows were wrong.

Detective Alice Chen watched them twist at the corner of her vision, moving against the harsh fluorescent lights in patterns that defied conventional physics. Since the events at Daybridge Bridge six months ago, her perception had become increasingly sensitive to anomalies that existed at the boundaries of conventional reality. Beside her, Detective Ethan Reeves -- or the manifestation of him that could temporarily separate from his primary consciousness distributed throughout the bridge -- swore softly.

"Third one this month," he said, his voice carrying those subtle harmonics that reminded Alice of his transformed nature. "Same pattern of energetic depletion. It's like something extracted their life force without damaging the physical form."

"No pattern," Chen snapped on latex gloves with practiced efficiency, her tactical mind refusing to jump to supernatural conclusions despite her recent experiences. "Just emptiness. Like something reached inside and..."

"Took what it needed?"

They turned simultaneously toward the voice. A woman stood in the morgue doorway, silver rings glinting on every finger as she adjusted leather gloves designed to make the metallic bands visible while maintaining sterile protocol. Her dark hair was shot through with striking white streaks that appeared natural rather than cosmetic, framing a face marked by intelligence and experiences beyond conventional understanding. Her eyes -- sharp, assessing, and haunted -- had seen too much to maintain the comfortable illusions that most people wrapped around themselves like protective blankets.

"Lila Darkmagic." Reeves straightened, recognition in his slightly luminous eyes. Through his connection to the nexus entity beneath Daybridge Bridge, he could perceive aspects of this woman's nature that transcended conventional observation. "The consultant from--"

"Prague." She moved to the autopsy table with fluid confidence, her own shadow falling wrong against the morgue's tile floor -- stretching and contracting independently of the overhead lighting. "It's happening again."

"What is?" Alice's question carried professional skepticism despite her recent exposure to forces beyond conventional understanding.

Lila traced symbols in the air above the body -- gestures precise and practiced, clearly meaningful though not immediately recognizable to either detective. Silver light flickered between her rings, responding to these movements in ways that suggested technological enhancement rather than mystical significance, though the distinction seemed increasingly arbitrary with each passing moment.

"Someone's trying to break the equations," she said softly, her accent reflecting Eastern European origins beneath years of international travel. "Someone who never learned that some doors should stay closed. Someone who refuses to accept that some debts can't be paid, regardless of what resources or sacrifices you're willing to commit."

"You know who's doing this," Chen said. Not a question but recognition of certainty in the consultant's demeanor.

"Yes." Lila's smile held grief and steel in equal measure, the expression of someone who had made peace with terrible knowledge while remaining determined to prevent its consequences. "He was my partner once. My love. My brilliant, ambitious Viktor. Until I chose differently."

She touched one of her silver rings to the corpse's forehead; the metal briefly flared with that same strange light. Where the ring made contact, the victim's skin revealed patterns invisible to conventional examination -- symbols etched at a cellular level in configurations that suggested deliberate composition rather than random effect.

"The Department brought me in as a consultant because I've seen this before," Lila continued, her voice taking on the clinical precision of a specialist reporting findings. "These deaths appear natural to conventional medicine -- heart failure, stroke, sudden neurological collapse. But they're actually systematic extractions of specific life-energy patterns. Harvesting, if you will."

Outside the morgue windows, storm clouds gathered with unnatural speed, lightning flickering in patterns that seemed almost deliberate. In the harsh fluorescent light, shadows continued to dance like memory given substance, reaching toward the corpse with hungry anticipation.

"Harvesting for what purpose?" Ethan asked, the harmonics in his voice intensifying as his connection to the nexus entity provided context beyond what Lila had explicitly stated.

"To pay a debt," she replied, her eyes meeting his with recognition of his transformed nature. "Or rather, to attempt the impossible -- to break a contract with forces that don't recognize conventional notions of negotiation or mercy."

Alice studied the consultant's face, her detective's instincts cataloging micro-expressions and vocal patterns that suggested personal involvement beyond professional consultation. "This isn't just another case for you."

"No." Lila straightened, adjusting her silver rings with practiced precision. "This is my responsibility. Twenty-eight years ago, I helped open a door that should have remained closed. I've spent my life since then developing methods to contain what escaped. But Viktor... Viktor never accepted our failure. He's been searching for alternative approaches ever since."

"And now he's found one," Ethan observed, his perception extending beyond the morgue's physical boundaries to sense disturbances in the energetic patterns flowing throughout Daybridge. "Here, in our city."

"Yes." Lila's expression hardened with resolve. "Daybridge has always been a nexus point for certain energetic configurations. The bridge itself serves as a conduit between dimensional frameworks in ways that most cities lack. After what happened six months ago, when the dimensional boundaries were significantly altered throughout the city, the resonance patterns have become even more accessible to those with the knowledge to detect and manipulate them."

And somewhere in the city, ancient powers stirred, hungry for what was promised long ago in a stone chamber in Prague. Forces that recognized no authority except the binding agreements established through ritual and sacrifice, patterns of energy and intent that had waited patiently for decades while pieces moved into position for resolution of debts long deferred.

The echoes of Prague were growing louder, resonating through Daybridge's transformed reality with increasing urgency as Halloween approached -- the night when boundaries between worlds traditionally thinned, when what had been contained might fully manifest if the proper conditions were established.

As Lila Darkmagic completed her examination of the body, her silver rings gleaming under the morgue lights, Ethan and Alice exchanged glances that conveyed shared understanding. Their investigation had just expanded beyond conventional homicide into realms they had experienced six months earlier beneath Daybridge Bridge -- dimensional forces beyond human comprehension, ancient patterns of energy and awareness that existed alongside conventional reality like parallel tracks occasionally converging with catastrophic results.

The cosmic chess game that had seemingly concluded with the redirection of the Obsidian Protocol was revealing itself as merely the opening gambit in a more complex configuration. And as Halloween approached, the players were moving into position for the next phase of a conflict that transcended individual lives or conventional understanding of reality itself.

Chapter One: Grave Consequences

The acrid stench of decay hung heavy in the night air as Detective Ethan Reeves surveyed the desecrated graveyard. Shattered tombstones and gaping holes where coffins once lay greeted him like a macabre gallery of vandalism taken to disturbing extremes. The waning crescent moon cast a sickly glow over the scene, deepening the shadows that seemed to writhe with a life of their own—a phenomenon Ethan no longer dismissed as mere tricks of light since his transformation six months ago.

His heightened senses picked up nuances imperceptible to ordinary humans: the subtle shift in air currents that carried particles of disturbed soil, the whisper of movement from nocturnal creatures disturbed by an unnatural presence, and something else—a discordant note in the symphony of ordinary night sounds that made his skin prickle with instinctive warning.

"This is the third one this week," his partner, Alice Chen, murmured beside him. Her almond-shaped eyes narrowed as she took in the eerie sight, flashlight beam sweeping methodically across the violated earth. The beam illuminated fragments of splintered wood and tattered shrouds scattered among upturned soil and trampled flowers left by mourners. "What kind of sick freak gets their kicks robbing graves?"

The beam lingered on a particularly violent excavation where the coffin had been not merely opened but shattered, as if something had exploded outward from within. Alice's expression remained professionally neutral, but Ethan detected the subtle acceleration in her heartbeat, the microscopic dilation of her pupils that signaled controlled anxiety beneath her composed exterior.

Ethan crouched down, his keen senses picking up on the faint, cloying scent of something far more sinister than mere graveyard soil. It was the unmistakable reek of dark magic, like ozone and burnt offerings mingled with the coppery tang of freshly spilled blood. The smell activated ancient memories within him—not his own, but those accessed through his connection to the nexus entity beneath Daybridge Bridge, memories of rituals performed generations ago when the boundaries between worlds were manipulated by those seeking power beyond human limitations.

"Not just any freak," he growled, his voice taking on a rough edge as his inner wolf stirred in response to the dark energy permeating the air. The wolf aspect of his nature had become more integrated since the events at the bridge, no longer a separate entity fighting for control but a complementary awareness that enhanced his perceptions when threats manifested. "This is the work of a necromancer."

Alice's breath hitched, her hand instinctively reaching for the gun at her hip—a reflexive action born from years of police work rather than any expectation that conventional weapons would prove effective against supernatural threats. "A necromancer? In Daybridge? I thought they were just a myth."

She maintained remarkable composure despite the implications. Since witnessing Ethan's transformation and the cosmic confrontation beneath the bridge, Alice had adapted to their new reality with characteristic resilience, but even she had limits to what she could accept without question.

Ethan shook his head grimly, rising from his crouched position with fluid grace that betrayed his nonhuman aspects. "In a city like this, myths have a way of coming to life." His gaze swept the desecrated cemetery, penetrating shadows that would have been impenetrable to ordinary human vision. "Especially since the events at the bridge. The dimensional boundaries are thinner now, more permeable. Things that couldn't manifest before can find their way through more easily."

The silver pendant at Alice's throat—Father Muligan's parting gift inscribed with protective symbols—caught the moonlight as she surveyed the destruction. "Like the shadow anomalies we've been tracking downtown?"

"Similar principle, different manifestation," Ethan confirmed. "The shadow anomalies are echoes, impressions left by the thinning boundaries. This—" he gestured to the violated graves, "—is deliberate. Purposeful. Someone with knowledge and power is manipulating the weakened boundaries for specific ends."

As they picked their way through the desecrated graves, the detectives searched for any clues that might lead them to the perpetrator. Ethan's heightened senses were on full alert, his nostrils flaring as he caught the scent of something out of place among the earthy smells of the graveyard—a chemical tang that didn't belong, synthetic and sharp amid the organic decay.

"Over here," he called out, kneeling beside a mound of freshly turned earth. Embedded in the loose soil was a small, intricately carved object—a sigil, pulsing with an eerie crimson light that ebbed and flowed like a heartbeat. Ethan felt a shudder of revulsion ripple through him as he realized the carving was made from human bone, yellowed with age but meticulously crafted into patterns that seemed to shift subtly when viewed from different angles.

Alice joined him, her face paling as she caught sight of the macabre talisman. "Is that what I think it is?"

Ethan nodded grimly. "A necromancer's calling card. They use sigils like this to control the dead, to bend them to their will." He carefully extracted the sigil from the dirt, feeling the oily taint of dark magic clinging to its surface like a film. Through his connection to the nexus entity, he perceived how the object served as a focal point for energies that shouldn't exist in conventional reality—a conduit between worlds that allowed manipulation of life forces beyond their natural parameters.

"But why here?" Alice asked, scanning the surrounding graves with renewed attention. "This cemetery isn't particularly old or significant. There are historical burial grounds downtown that would have older remains, potentially more powerful for whatever ritual they're attempting."

Ethan turned the sigil over in his gloved hand, feeling its wrongness even through the protective barrier. "It's not about age or historical significance," he explained, drawing on knowledge that came partly from his own research and partly through his connection to the composite consciousness beneath the bridge. "It's about specific energetic patterns. This cemetery sits at a convergence point of what occultists call ley lines—natural channels of energy that flow throughout the earth. Combined with the thinning dimensional boundaries since the events at the bridge..."

"It creates ideal conditions for necromantic rituals," Alice finished, her analytical mind making connections despite her limited experience with the supernatural. "So, they're not just randomly robbing graves. They're targeting specific burial sites for specific purposes."

As he pocketed the grisly find in an evidence bag, a sudden sound caught his attention—the rasp of footsteps on gravel, like the shuffling gait of something not quite alive. Ethan's head snapped up, his eyes widening as he saw a figure lurching toward them through the darkness.

It was a corpse, its flesh grey and rotting, its eyes glowing with an unholy yellow light that illuminated the cavernous hollows of its face. The creature's movements were jerky and unnatural, like a marionette being puppeteered by an unseen hand. Ethan's nostrils flared as the stench of decay and dark magic rolled off the abomination in nauseating waves—putrefaction accelerated and perverted by energies that violated natural order.

"Alice, get down!" he shouted, his voice echoing through the empty graveyard. In a blur of motion, he shifted into his werewolf form—not the painful transformation of bones and muscles that had once characterized his monthly ordeals, but a fluid integration of his lycanthropic nature with his human consciousness. His form expanded, muscles rippling beneath skin that sprouted silver-grey fur, his face elongating into a muzzle filled with gleaming fangs as his senses sharpened beyond human limitations.

With a roar that shook the earth, Ethan launched himself at the undead creature, his powerful jaws clamping down on the corpse's throat. The taste of rotting flesh and dark magic filled his mouth, making him gag even as his teeth tore through desiccated muscle and bone. The creature fought back with unnatural strength, its bony fingers scrabbling at Ethan's face and chest as it tried to break free from his grip.

Behind him, Alice had taken cover behind a marble mausoleum, her service weapon drawn though she held her fire, waiting for a clear shot that wouldn't risk hitting her transformed partner. Her training had never covered combat protocols for werewolf-versus-zombie encounters, but her adaptability had served her well in the months since discovering her partner's dual nature.

The undead creature's strength was formidable—far beyond what its desiccated muscles should have been capable of—but the werewolf's raw power was too much for the animated corpse.

With a sickening crunch, Ethan's jaws crushed its skull like an overripe melon, dark ichor spraying across his muzzle as the unholy light in its eye sockets flickered and died.

As the creature crumpled to the ground, Ethan shifted back to his human form with practiced ease, his chest heaving with exertion. The integration of his lycanthropic nature since the events at the bridge had given him unprecedented control over his transformations, allowing him to shift at will without the pain or loss of self-awareness that had once accompanied the change.

Alice was at his side in an instant, her eyes wide with a mixture of awe and concern as she took in the sight of Ethan's blood-spattered face and torn clothing. "Are you alright?" she asked, her voice betraying only the slightest tremor as she holstered her weapon.

Ethan nodded, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, grimacing at the foul taste that lingered. "I'm fine. But this is just the beginning." He gestured toward the fallen corpse, which was already beginning to decompose at an accelerated rate now that the animating energies had dissipated. "Whoever's behind this, they're not going to stop until they have what they want."

Alice's jaw tightened, her gaze hardening with determination. "Then we'll just have to stop them first. We'll find this necromancer, Ethan. We'll put an end to their sick little game."

Ethan met her gaze, his own eyes still glowing faintly with residual energy from his transformation. "Damn right we will. And when we do, they'll wish they'd never set foot in Daybridge."

He crouched beside the rapidly decomposing corpse, examining what remained before it disintegrated completely. "We need to document this before it's gone. The rate of decay suggests the animation was temporary—a sentry rather than a permanent resurrection. Whoever raised it only needed it to function long enough to alert them to intruders."

Alice was already photographing the remains with methodical efficiency, her professional training asserting itself despite the supernatural nature of their investigation. "So, the necromancer knows we're here now. That we're on their trail."

"Yes," Ethan confirmed grimly. "And they'll be preparing for us. We need to move quickly."

As they turned to leave the desecrated graveyard, the first rays of dawn began to peek over the horizon, casting a pale, watery light over the city. The skyline of Daybridge was visible in the distance—a jagged silhouette of skyscrapers and historical buildings intersected by the distinctive arch of Daybridge Bridge, its structure seeming to shimmer slightly in the early morning light as reality rippled around it in ways only Ethan could perceive.

Even as the sun rose, the shadows seemed to deepen, their inky tendrils ensnaring the unsuspecting city like parasitic vines seeking purchase on a healthy host. Ethan and Alice knew

that their battle had only begun—that the darkness lurking at the heart of Daybridge would not be vanquished so easily.

But they were ready to face whatever horrors the necromancer had in store. They were the city's guardians, the thin blue line standing between the innocent and the monstrous. And they would not rest until the streets of Daybridge were safe once more.

The drive back to the precinct was a somber one, the weight of their grim discovery hanging heavy in the air. Ethan gripped the steering wheel of his battered old muscle car—a '69 Mustang that had seen better days but purred like a contented cat when he opened the throttle—his knuckles turning white as he navigated the rain-slicked streets. The city was beginning to stir, the first bleary-eyed commuters making their way to work as the neon signs of all-night diners and seedy bars flickered and buzzed in the grey light of dawn.

Alice sat silently in the passenger seat; her gaze fixed on the evidence bag containing the sigil they had found in the graveyard. The bone talisman continued to pulse with an eerie red light, visible even through the protective plastic. Ethan could almost hear the gears turning in her head as she tried to make sense of the macabre artifact.

"I've never seen anything like this before," she murmured, tracing the outline of the bag with a fingertip, careful not to touch the sigil directly despite the barrier. "The symbols, the craftsmanship... it's almost beautiful, in a twisted sort of way."

Ethan grunted, his jaw clenching as he remembered the foul energy that had pulsed from the sigil like a sickness. "There's nothing beautiful about dark magic, Alice. It's a corruption, a blight on everything it touches." The words came from somewhere deep within him—not just personal opinion but knowledge accessed through his connection to the nexus entity, memories of countless confrontations between natural order and those who sought to pervert it for personal gain.

Alice glanced up at him, her dark eyes searching his face. "You sound like you've had experience with this sort of thing before."

Ethan hesitated, his grip tightening on the steering wheel as he navigated around a delivery truck double-parked on Main Street. Despite everything they'd been through together—the cosmic confrontation beneath the bridge, his transformation and partial integration with the nexus entity—there were still aspects of his past he hadn't shared with Alice. Experiences from before they became partners, from the dark years following his initial infection with lycanthropy when he'd wandered the edges of society, learning to control his condition through painful trial and error.

"I have," he said at last, his voice low and rough with memories he preferred not to revisit. "More than I'd like to admit. The supernatural world, the things that lurk in the shadows... they've been a part of my life for a long time."

Alice was silent for a moment, digesting his words as rain began to patter against the windshield again—a persistent drizzle that matched the somber mood in the car. When she spoke again, her voice was soft but firm, carrying the steadfast loyalty that had defined their partnership through increasingly extraordinary circumstances.

"I know there's more to you than meets the eye, Ethan. I've always known. But whatever you're going through, whatever demons you're fighting... you don't have to do it alone."

Ethan felt a sudden lump in his throat, a swell of emotion that threatened to overwhelm his carefully maintained composure. In all his years as a detective, as a werewolf navigating a world that would fear him if they knew his true nature, he had never had someone who understood him, who accepted him for all that he was. But Alice, with her fierce loyalty and unwavering courage, had become more than just his partner—she had become his anchor, his guiding light in the darkness that constantly threatened to consume him.

"Thank you," he said at last, his voice hoarse with emotion he rarely allowed himself to express. "I... I don't know what I'd do without you, Alice."

She reached out and squeezed his hand where it rested on the gearshift, her touch warm and reassuring through the tactile connection. "You'll never have to find out. We're in this together, Ethan. No matter what happens, no matter what we're up against... I've got your back."

The simple statement carried weight beyond its words—a promise between partners that had evolved into something deeper since the events at the bridge. Not just professional colleagues facing danger together, but individuals whose lives had become intertwined through experiences that transcended conventional understanding.

Ethan felt a surge of warmth flood through him, a feeling of belonging he had never known before. For the first time in his life, he didn't feel like a monster, like an outsider looking in on a world that would never truly accept him. With Alice by his side, he felt like he could take on anything—even a necromancer hell-bent on plunging the city into darkness.

As they pulled into the precinct parking lot—a cracked concrete expanse littered with patrol cars and the personal vehicles of officers working the night shift—Ethan took a deep breath, steeling himself for the day ahead. He knew that they were in for a long and difficult investigation, that the road ahead would be fraught with danger and uncertainty. But with Alice by his side, he felt a newfound sense of purpose, a determination to see this case through to the end no matter what the cost.

They made their way into the bullpen, the usual bustle of activity and chatter washing over them like a familiar tide. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting a harsh glow over tired faces and cluttered desks. The familiar scents of stale coffee, printer ink, and the lingering odor of fast food consumed during hurried lunch breaks created an olfactory landscape that Ethan had learned to associate with the routine of police work.

But as they approached their desks, Ethan noticed a strange hush falling over the room, a palpable sense of unease that set his nerves on edge. Conversations died mid-sentence, heads turned in their direction, and expressions shifted from professional neutrality to something more complex—a mixture of relief at their arrival and dread at what had necessitated it.

"What's going on?" he asked, his brow furrowing as he took in the worried expressions on his colleagues' faces.

One of the other detectives, a grizzled veteran named Simmons with a perpetual five o'clock shadow and eyes that had seen too much in thirty years on the force, stepped forward. His face was grim, the lines around his mouth deeper than usual as he clutched a case folder with white-knuckled intensity.

"There's been another one," he said, his voice low and urgent. "Another body found in an alleyway downtown. But this one... it's different."

Ethan and Alice exchanged glances, their hearts sinking as they realized the implications of Simmons' words. "Different how?" Alice asked, her voice tight with tension.

Simmons shook his head, his eyes haunted by whatever he had witnessed. "You'll have to see for yourself. But I'm warning you now... it's not pretty."

He handed the folder to Ethan, who flipped it open to reveal crime scene photographs that made even his hardened stomach churn with revulsion. The images showed a body—or what remained of one—displayed in a manner that went beyond murder into the realm of ritualistic desecration.

Ethan felt a chill run down his spine, a sense of foreboding he couldn't shake. Whatever they were about to walk into, he had a feeling that it would be worse than anything they had ever faced before—even considering the cosmic horror they had confronted beneath the bridge six months ago.

As they grabbed their gear and headed for the door, Ethan caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window—a man haunted by secrets, a werewolf torn between two worlds, now partially integrated with a dimensional nexus entity that existed beyond conventional human understanding. The complexity of his existence would have been overwhelming if not for the steadying presence beside him.

He met Alice's steady gaze in the reflection, drawing strength from her unwavering support. Together, they would face whatever horrors the necromancer had in store. Together, they would stop the darkness from consuming their city.

The crime scene was a nightmare made flesh, a twisted mockery of life that made even Ethan's hardened stomach churn with revulsion. The body lay sprawled in the center of the alleyway; its

limbs splayed at unnatural angles like a discarded marionette. But the face—or rather, what was left of it—made Ethan's blood run cold.

The flesh had been stripped away with surgical precision, leaving only a grinning skull that leered up at them with empty eye sockets that seemed to follow their movements with malevolent awareness. The bones were cracked and splintered in specific patterns, not random damage but deliberate alterations that formed a grotesque parody of human features. But even more disturbing were the symbols carved into the bones themselves—intricate, arcane sigils that pulsed with the same sickly red light as the talisman they had found in the graveyard.

The alley itself had been transformed into a ritual space. Symbols drawn in what appeared to be a mixture of blood and ash formed concentric circles around the body, their patterns corresponding to the sigils carved into the victim's exposed bones. Candle stubs placed at precise intervals had burned down to nothing; their wax pooled in patterns that seemed too deliberate to be coincidental.

"My God," Alice whispered, her face pale and stricken as she took in the grotesque tableau. Her hand hovered near her service weapon, though what protection conventional firearms might offer against whatever had done this remained questionable. "What could do something like this?"

Ethan shook his head, his jaw clenched so tightly that he could feel his teeth grinding together. The wolf within him stirred restlessly, responding to the malevolent energies that permeated the scene like a miasma. Through his connection to the nexus entity, he could perceive how reality itself seemed thinner here, the boundaries between dimensions stretched to near-transparency by whatever ritual had been performed.

"This is no ordinary murder," he said, his voice low and grim as he crouched beside the body, careful not to disturb the ritual markings surrounding it. "This is a message, a warning. The necromancer is growing bolder, more powerful. And they're not going to stop until they get what they want."

As they began to process the scene, gathering what little evidence they could find amidst the grisly remains, Ethan's mind raced with possibilities. The forensics team worked methodically around them, photographing, measuring, and collecting samples with the detached professionalism of those who had seen too much to be easily shocked. But even these hardened crime scene technicians moved with unusual caution, as if subconsciously sensing that they were dealing with something beyond conventional violence.

"The victim appears to be male, approximately thirty to forty years old based on bone structure," the medical examiner reported, her voice clinically precise despite the horror before her. "Cause of death... well, that's more complicated. The flesh removal appears to have been done post-mortem, but I can't determine what killed him until we get him back to the lab."

Ethan nodded, his enhanced senses picking up details the ME couldn't possibly detect through conventional examination. "The body's been completely drained of life energy," he said quietly to Alice, keeping his voice low to avoid being overheard by the other personnel. "Not just blood or physical fluids, but the essential force that animates living beings. It's been extracted and channeled into whatever ritual was performed here."

Alice's expression remained professionally neutral, but her eyes reflected understanding of the implications. "Like batteries for a magical device?"

"Exactly," Ethan confirmed, grimly impressed by her quick grasp of supernatural mechanics despite her limited exposure. "Human life force is potent fuel for certain types of magic—especially necromancy. The more violent or traumatic the death, the more power it generates."

They spent hours at the crime scene, combing through every inch of the alleyway for any clues that might lead them to their quarry. The symbols, the ritual configuration, the specific mutilations inflicted on the victim—all of it spoke to a practitioner with extensive knowledge and alarming precision. This wasn't random experimentation or amateur dabbling in the dark arts. This was the work of someone who knew exactly what they were doing and had specific, calculated goals.

But as the sun began to set, and the shadows lengthened, Ethan knew that they were running out of time. The necromancer was out there somewhere, growing stronger with every passing moment. And if they didn't stop them soon, the streets of Daybridge would run red with blood.

As they made their way back to the precinct, Ethan's mind churned with dark thoughts. He couldn't shake the feeling that they were missing something, some important piece of the puzzle that would make everything fall into place. The sigils on the bones, the way they had pulsed with that eerie red light... there was something familiar about them, something that tugged at the edges of his consciousness like a half-remembered dream.

It wasn't until they were back at their desks, pouring over the evidence they had collected, that the answer finally came to him. The sigils on the bones, the specific configuration of the ritual space, the extraction of life energy rather than simple physical mutilation—he had seen something like it before, in a case he had worked years ago, before Alice had become his partner.

"Alice," he said, his voice low and urgent as he pulled a file from his desk drawer—a cold case that had never been officially solved. "I think I know what we're dealing with here. But if I'm right... we're going to need some help."

He spread the file contents across his desk—photographs of a similar ritual configuration found in an abandoned warehouse three years earlier, victim posed in the same marionette-like position though the mutilations had been less extreme. The case had been classified as a ritualistic homicide, possibly connected to cult activity, but had gone cold when no further victims had appeared and conventional investigation methods had yielded no viable suspects.

Alice studied the photographs with narrowed eyes, her analytical mind immediately connecting patterns between the old case and their current investigation. "The same perpetrator?"

"Not exactly," Ethan said, his expression troubled as he extracted a particular photograph showing a partial footprint preserved in ritual ash—a distinctive boot print with occult symbols embedded in the sole. "But I think they're connected. The methodology is too similar to be coincidental. And if I'm right about the magical signature..."

Alice looked up at him, her dark eyes searching his face. "What kind of help?"

Ethan hesitated, his mind racing as he weighed his options. He knew that what he was about to suggest went against every protocol, every rule he had sworn to uphold as a detective. But he also knew that they were running out of time, that the necromancer's power was growing with every passing moment.

"We need to talk to Lila Darkmagic," he said at last, his voice heavy with resignation. "She's the only one who might know how to stop this."

Alice's eyes widened, her mouth falling open in shock. "Lila Darkmagic? The consultant who just arrived from Prague? The one who set up that containment ritual in the morgue this morning?"

Ethan nodded, relieved that Alice's reaction wasn't as negative as he'd feared. "She has specialized knowledge in this field—experience with necromantic rituals and their countermeasures. If anyone can help us figure out what we're up against, it's her."

Alice was silent for a moment, her gaze searching Ethan's face as if trying to read his thoughts. At last, she nodded, her jaw set with determination. "Alright," she said, her voice low and steady. "Let's do it. But if this goes sideways, Reeves... it's on you."

Ethan nodded, his heart heavy with the weight of responsibility. He knew that he was taking a risk, that bringing Lila more deeply into the investigation could have unforeseen consequences. The woman carried her own dark history—he could sense it in the way reality seemed to ripple around her, in the silver rings she wore on every finger, in the haunted look that sometimes crossed her face when she thought no one was watching.

But he also knew that they had no other choice. The necromancer was out there, growing stronger with every passing moment. And if they didn't stop them soon, the streets of Daybridge would run red with blood.

As they made their way out of the precinct and into the night, Ethan could feel the weight of the city pressing down on him like a physical force. The shadows seemed to writhe and twist with a malevolent intelligence, as if sensing the darkness gathering on the horizon. But as he glanced over at Alice, her face set with grim determination, he felt a flicker of hope kindle in his chest.

Together, they would find this necromancer, this manipulator of death and dimensional energies. Together, they would stop the darkness from consuming their city.

And if that meant enlisting the help of someone like Lila Darkmagic—a woman who clearly carried her own burdens of past mistakes and arcane knowledge—then so be it. When monsters lurked in every shadow and dark magic thrummed beneath the surface of reality, sometimes the only way to fight fire was with fire.

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About the Author

Rae Stonehouse crafts dark supernatural mysteries where noir meets the paranormal. Drawing on over 40 years in psychology and mental health, he brings emotional depth and psychological complexity to urban fantasy. The Ethan Reeves series explores the shadows lurking in Daybridge—where every case uncovers secrets better left buried.

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