

BRIDGE OF SOULS

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PART ONE

SUGAR AND SKULLS

CHAPTER ONE

I can think of so many nice ways to wake up.

There's the smell of pancakes in summer, or the first cool breeze of fall. The lazy comfort of a snow day, the world buried beneath blankets. When waking feels easy and peaceful, a slow transition from dreaming to daylight.

And then there's *this*:

The jolt of curtains thrown open onto glaring sun, and the sudden weight of a very large cat landing on my chest.

I groan and drag my eyes open, and see Grim staring down at me, one black paw hovering over my face.

“Off,” I mutter, rolling until the cat flops sideways onto the sheets. He shoots me a sour look, lets out a soft cat sigh, and sinks deeper into the bed.

“Rise and shine!” says Mom in a voice that’s way too chipper, considering we just got in last night and my body has no idea what time it is. There’s a dull thud in my head, and I don’t know if it’s jet lag or ghosts.

I pull the sheets back up, shivering at the false cold of the hotel's air-conditioning, which has been humming all night. Mom opens the window, but instead of a breeze, a wall of warmth pushes in.

The air is sticky with summer heat.

Down on the street, someone is singing off-key, and the low sound of a trombone wanders up to meet it. A voice howls with laughter. Someone drops something and it rings like an empty pot.

Even at ten a.m., New Orleans is full of noise.

I sit up, my hair a nest of tangled curls, and look around, groggy with sleep. Huh.

When we got in last night, I didn't do much more than wash my face and fall into bed. But now that I'm awake, I realize our hotel room isn't exactly normal. Not that anywhere we've stayed on our travels has been "normal," but the Hotel Kardec is particularly odd.

My bed is nestled in one corner, raised on a little platform. There's a sitting area between my perch and the massive four-poster bed my parents have claimed on the other side of the room. That's not the strange part. No, the strange part is that the whole room is decorated in rich purples

and dark blues with gold accents, and silk and velvet are draped over everything, like the inside of a fortune-teller's tent. The drawer handles and wall hooks are shaped like hands: fingers clasped or palms up, reaching.

We left our suitcases in a pile on the polished wood floor, clothes spilling out in our eagerness to change and crash post-flight. And there in the center of the chaos, between my mom's toiletry case and my camera bag, sits Jacob Ellis Hale, best friend and resident ghost.

Jacob's been haunting me since last summer, when I fell in a river and he saved my life. Together, we've faced spirits in Scotland, poltergeists in Paris, graveyards and Catacombs, and more.

He sits cross-legged, elbows resting on his knees, a comic open on the floor in front of him. As I watch, the pages *turn*.

It could be a breeze, but my mom has already closed the window.

And the pages only turn one way, at roughly the pace of a boy reading a book.

We both know he shouldn't be able to do that.

A week ago he couldn't, and now—

“Come on, Cass,” says Mom. “Chop-chop.”

We’re not filming until tonight, so I’m about to protest, when Dad adds, “We’re meeting our guide at Café du Monde.”

I perk up, curious. Every place we travel for my parents’ show, we get a new guide. Someone who really knows the city—and its secrets. I wonder what our guide here will be like. If they’ll be a skeptic, or a believer.

Across the room, my parents bustle around, getting ready. Mom wipes a streak of shaving cream from Dad’s jaw. He helps Mom with the clasp of her bracelet.

Right now, they’re still my parents: clumsy, and nerdy, and sweet. But tonight, when the cameras go on, they’ll become something more: the Inspecters, world-traveling, ghost-hunting paranormal investigators, larger than life.

“Your life is pretty large,” says Jacob without looking up. “Or at least, pretty strange. I’ve never really understood how a life changes *size . . .*”

Jacob Ellis Hale, best friend, resident ghost, and constant eavesdropper.

He holds up his hands. “It’s not my fault you think so loud.”

As far as I can tell, his ability to read my mind has something to do with the fact that he pulled me back from the land of the dead, and I pulled him into the land of the living, and we got kind of stuck together. Like hair and chewing gum.

Jacob frowns. “Am I the *gum*?”

I roll my eyes. The thing is, I should be able to read his mind, too.

“Maybe my thoughts are just quiet,” he says.

Maybe your head is just empty, I think, sticking out my tongue.

He scowls.

I snort.

My parents turn and look at me.

“Sorry.” I shrug. “Just Jacob.”

Mom smiles, but Dad raises a brow. Mom’s the believer, though I’m not really sure she believes in Jacob-the-ghost or Jacob-the-imaginary-friend-and-convenient-excuse-for-why-her-daughter-gets-into-so-much-trouble. Dad is definitely *not* a believer, and he thinks I’m getting too old for imaginary friends. I agree. But Jacob is hardly imaginary, just invisible, and it’s not my fault my parents can’t see him.

Yet.

I think the word as quietly as possible, but Jacob still hears. He doesn't seem to catch the dread in it, though, because he stands up and smiles.

"You know," he says, exhaling against the window, "maybe I could . . ."

He brings his index finger to the fog and frowns, concentrating, as he draws a *J*. To my surprise—and horror—the letter shows up on the glass.

I lunge out of bed and wipe it away before my parents can see.

"Killjoy," he mutters, but the last thing I need is Mom and Dad realizing Jacob *is* real, or that I almost died, or that I've been spending every second of free time hunting down ghosts. Somehow, I don't think they'd approve.

Sit, stay, I order as I slip into the bathroom to get dressed.

I pull my hair up into a messy bun and try not to think about the fact that my best friend is absolutely, undeniably, getting stronger.

I free my necklace from under my shirt collar and study the dangling mirror pendant. A mirror, to show the truth. A mirror, to remind the spirits that they're dead. A mirror,

to hold them still, so I can break the thread, and send them on.

My reflection stares back at me, uncertain, and I try not to think about the Veil, or the reason ghosts are meant to stay on the other side. I try not to think about what happens to spirits who become real enough to touch our world. I try not to think about my friend Lara Chowdhury, who told me it was *my* job to send Jacob on before he becomes too dangerous, before, before.

I try not to think about the dreams I've had, where Jacob's eyes go red, and the world breaks apart around him, and he doesn't remember who I am, doesn't remember who *he* is, and I have to choose between saving my best friend and saving everything else.

I try not to think about any of it.

Instead, I finish getting dressed, and when I come back out, Jacob is sprawled on the floor in front of Grim, engaged in what looks like a staring contest. I remind myself that Jacob is Jacob. He's not an ordinary ghost. He's my best friend.

Jacob breaks his gaze, glancing toward me, and I know he can hear my thoughts so instead I focus on Grim.