

## Gayle Morrow

"So, what do you wish me to write?" asked the tall figure standing in front of me at the reception desk. The voice was deep, smooth as melted chocolate, and dripping with disdain.

I heaved a heavy sigh, and replied, "Just put your name here," I tapped the top line, "contact information here," middle line, "then fill in whatever comments you'd like to make in this box at the bottom, and sign here." I made a little "x" with my pen next to the signature line.

The figure was clad head-to-toe in a brown velvet cloak, with the hood pulled down to obscure the face. The build was slender, but so tall that it was hard to judge more than that. The stance was bored and a little foot-sore, but after another rustling of the papers on the desk, the figure bent a little – figuratively and literally – and filled in all of the requested information as requested. With a flourish of leather-gloved fingers, the figure handed the form back to me.

"Thank you," I said, offering up a professional smile that contained a few more teeth than necessary. "Enjoy your stay."

"I shall. Pleasant business to you and yours," the figure replied as they glided off.

The swish of the cloak and the clomp of the leather boots on the carpeted stairs opposite the desk soon faded, leaving me alone in the lobby.

My feet were screaming, my back was stiffening, and all I wanted was a cup of the complementary coffee I could smell wafting in from the little cafe at the end of the corridor. The starch in my collar was making my neck itch, and wisps of hair had trailed out of my once-tidy bun. The room lost a bit of focus as I pulled my glasses down to rub at the bridge of my nose. I hoped at that moment that my new contact-lenses had been delivered.

Shifting from one side to the other, I rotated each ankle in turn as I set about organizing the papers on the reception desk. The lobby had emptied. The ornamental clock on the wall had slowed again – now ten minutes behind – I'd have to get Buddy to tinker with it again. Mental calculations told me I had about half-an-hour left to my shift, assuming Catty arrived on time. The odds these days were about 50/50, between her mother's failing health and her nasty divorce proceedings.

As I was filing away the sign-in forms, something clattered off the desk, and made a heavy, dull thud as it landed on the carpet. Noting the noise, I finished my filing, and then turned to look. It wasn't easy to see over the top of the desk, so I was obliged to step out from behind it. On the floor at the foot of the desk was a small draw-string pouch. The fabric looked like worn velvet in a medium-blue. The pile had worn away around the seams of the pouch. The contents clicked together as I picked it up.

There was a warmth and a weight to it that felt odd. Turning it over, I noted an odd mark carefully stitched onto the one side of the pouch in golden-yellow thread. The cord tying it shut might have been made of silk, but I couldn't be sure. There wasn't any

other distinguishing marks. I vaguely remembered a similar dull thud on the counter when the cloaked guest had announced their arrival.

Just as I began to stand up, the phone in the reception area began to ring. Then I whacked my head on the lip of the counter trying to stand up. I cursed loudly and with very little creativity, bent down, and then tried again to stand up. The phone rang a second time, so I moved back behind the reception desk to answer it:

"Chilly Hills Bed and Breakfast. Front desk. How may I help you? Bonjour. Hola."

Rubbing the top of my head, I waited carefully for a voice on the other end. When it finally came, what I heard made no sense:

"The snake has been found. Strike down the crescent shadow and reclaim the kingdom from the vile scavengers."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," I said, "I believe you have the wrong number."

"Tell me this," the voice replied, "has anyone strange arrived in the last day or so?"

I tilted my head to the side, "Ma'am, this is festival season. 'Strange' is a relative term these days."

There was a harsh click on the other end and the dial-tone blared in my ear-drum. Replacing the receiver back on its cradle, I turned back towards the desk. The little pouch was sitting on the lower surface that also held the reception computer. I looked down at my empty hands: I must have put it down reflexively as I headed to answer the phone. The pot lights above me cast a warm light that glinted oddly as it reflected off the gold thread. The mark stitched there made no more sense now than it had before.

Picking it up, I shifted it to the side and sorted through the papers on the desk again. A warmth moved up my hand as my fingers brushed the fabric. Shaking off the feeling, I picked up the pouch. My hand was reaching for the draw-string before my reasoning caught up, but then I stopped.

"Alex!" a familiar voice called out across the lobby.

Looking up, I smiled in genuine relief. "Catty, you made it!"

My coworker straightened the creases from her blazer and beamed with unmistakable pride. "I just got out of the court! That bitch is *finally* about to get what's coming to her!"

I hid a smile as I fished for the keys attached to my lanyard. No need to follow up. Catty would fill me in without prompting. It was too bad too, in my opinion. I'd met Anna a couple of times over the years, and never seen any of the nastiness that Catty insisted was between the two of them.

I put the key in the lock for the lost-and-found as my colleague came in behind the desk. The room, not large to begin with, was suddenly filled with the almighty personality radiating off of my replacement.

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As she organized herself and her stuff, Catty kept up a long monologue on the proceedings of her on-going battle – this round was apparently regarding the custodial arrangements for their two dogs. I only half listened, offering the odd “uh-huh” and “okay” as manners seemed to require. Gathering my jacket, I turned over keys, files and everything else to my relief.

At last, Catty paused for breath, and I wished her a pleasant evening. Shouldering my bag, I headed out to the parking lot.

The heat of the day hit me like a brick wall as I stepped into the humidity and the sunlight. It was late summer, and there was still plenty of daylight left. The property on which the bed and breakfast was situated had plenty of trees, and a beautiful view down the hill to Chilly Lake. All the same, the 30-degree-celsius heat combined with a high humidex turned the expanse of asphalt leading to my bike into an absolute furnace.

My uniform jacket was off before I'd made it halfway. Lanyard came next. Reaching into my bag, I dug out my bicycle helmet and my gloves. Something clattered. I looked down: clearly something had been dislodged when I shuffled my bag's contents. Blinking in confusion, I stared at the little velvet pouch sitting sullenly on the hot asphalt. I thought back to the front desk. I'd definitely meant to put it in the lost-and-found, certain that the rightful owner would come to claim it. My next thought was to turn back around and hand it over to Catty for that very purpose.

My smart phone chirped like a chickadee, buzzing from its place in one of the other pockets of my backpack.

Stuffing my belongings, and the pouch too, into my bag, I stood up and checked my phone. A message from my mom popped up on the lock screen. “Are you coming over?” it read.

I strapped my bag to my back, and typed, “On my way now,” in reply. Tucking my phone back into its slot, I unlocked my bike and mounted up.

The breeze coming up from the lake was a relief as it ruffled through the slits in my bike helmet. I was thankful that the uniform had a shorts option: I would not have been able to peddle properly in the stiff pants required in the winter months. The ride from the B&B into town was blessedly downhill most of the way. Only sheer dedication to my job (and really the money it paid me) ensured that I survived the up-hill ride on the way *in*. Still, a 20 minute bike ride, up or down, was well worth it to me. It kept me in decent shape at the very least. The winding road that led from the town up into the hills cut through heavily forested terrain. It was not unusual to have to swerve for birds or other creatures.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, a brown blur darted under the guard-rail and skittered across the road. I gripped my brakes as hard as I could, putting my feet down at the same time. The saddle of my bike tried to fly up my butt at high speed, and my shins collided with the pedals. The whatever-it-was was gone as quickly as it had

appeared, and I was left panting on the unpaved shoulder of the road, looking around at the brush on either side, trying in vain to catch a glimpse of whatever I had failed to run over.

A breeze rustled through the trees to my right. A cold breeze that sent goose-flesh rising up into my hairline. A voice as insubstantial as smoke whispered, "The queen yet lives?" tickling my left earlobe.

Turning sharply, I looked around. I was alone.

The sun was still shining, its intensity had not been diminished. Still, the sweat on my neck and shoulders might as well have been made of ice. Glancing neither left nor right, I hopped up onto my bike and kicked off as hard as I could. The huffing of my breath as I pedalled down the road couldn't *quite* drown out the faint sound of laughter that chased close behind me.

The first intersection in the sleepy town of Chilly Lake, which normally filled me with dread at the idiot vacationers who didn't know how to use a god-damned stop sign, was an absolute *relief* as I pulled into it. Cars and people were cruising about, their intentions unknown, but undoubtedly earthly and mundane. Some kids rode past on their own bikes, calling out directions as they sped towards adventure, or home to a barbecued dinner.

My mother's house was an old stone and cedar-shake affair, the doors and windows perfectly in keeping with the antique aesthetic, the shingles and downspouts discreetly modern. The garden was lovingly if somewhat haphazardly tended, giving the place a haunted look in colder climates. This time of year, it just looked like a slightly overgrown meadow, with a few bird-feeders and whimsical decorations scattered about for flavour.

I used the last of my down-hill momentum to coast up the driveway, stepping off at the last second. My legs still shaking, I parked my bike in the tumble-down garage, and moved open the gate into the backyard.

"Alex!" my mother cried out as I met her on the path up to the back door, "I'm glad you finally made it."

I grimaced as I adjusted my bag to a more comfortable hold. "Yeah, well," I said, "it turns out Catty *was* able to make it in after all."

Mom's forehead crinkled in a show of concern, "Oh, those poor girls. Are they still fighting?"

I shrugged. "They're doing what they need to do, I guess."

Mom tutted. "I think Cathy is making a *big* mistake."

I gave only the slightest concession to her gossip-mongering, and replied, "Maybe, but I'm starting to think Anna *isn't*."

Mom shifted the tray she'd been carrying to her hip. "Those two should just kiss and make up before one of them *really* gets hurt."

I opted instead to change the subject. "Do you mind if I use the shower? I got kinda sweaty on the ride over."

My mom waved me towards the house with her usual flourish.

The white tile floor was blessedly cool against my feet as I stepped into the sunlit kitchen. The countertops were classic 80s laminate, stained and chipped at the corners, the particleboard backing starting to swell above the dishwasher. Mom *really* should have this place looked at by a professional. I cringed to think what kinds of life had spawned in the deep places between the stove and the cabinets. At least the rustic oak of the cabinets themselves looked to be in decent shape.

I scoffed at my own assessing nature. Who did I think I was, some crazy celebrity realtor, here to find the "rustic charm" hidden in this place before hyper-inflating the value through cosmetic changes.

Ditching my shoes on the mat, and my helmet on the pegs by the door, I left the kitchen and passed into the hallway beyond. Up the creaky wooden stairs – that should *probably* be carpeted, at least a little – I ducked into the teeny-tiny excuse of a bathroom just at the top of the landing. Shutting the door, I shed my work clothes, and turned to assess myself in the mirror above the vanity.

Medium-height, compact frame, I was flushed and streaked with dust from my bike-ride. Pulling the elastic from my dark, reddish brown hair, I shook the tangled waves until they tumbled down my pale, freckled back. My muddy-hazel eyes looked extra tired – the mascara had streaked, and the eyeshadow had smudged where I'd forgotten and rubbed it. I'd never worried too much about my appearance beyond basic grooming. Make-up could be fun, but I didn't always bother. Today I had. It was a little odd – I could manage a decent day-wear look in the morning, but by the end of the day, I always looked either strung out, or like I'd been in a fist-fight.

Boobs were... there... I dunno... C-cup last time I'd bought a bra that fit. Waist did what waists did – tucked in then rounded in the hip area. Thighs were starting to tone from all the biking, but I wouldn't call myself an athlete by any stretch of the word. Heaving a sigh, and adjusting my posture to perk up the breasts, I turned away from the mirror, and turned the shower on.

The water from the shower head thundered onto the metal of the old, turquoise bath tub. The steam began to rise in the room. I turned the knob for the fan as far as it would go, and stepped into the exquisitely hot stream. The shower-head was an old one too, so the water beat against my shoulders and scalp in a sensual rhythm. The water was as hot as I could stand, and yet, the sensation always gave me goosebumps. My sister could probably explain the science of that.

Using the cheap 2-in-1 shampoo my mom always bought, I scrubbed the dust from my hair, lathering up a second time just for shits-and-giggles. The temperature of the water tapered off as Mom's decrepit water heater ran out of... steam? So at last, I was forced to turn it off, and step back out into humid, subway-tiled reality.

The fan was doing its level best, but I still cracked the little frosted window that perched above the toilet. Gathering my discarded uniform, I reached into my bag for my non-work clothes: today's offering were a pair of khaki cargo shorts that hung to just above my knees, a clean pair of underwear (because ew!), and a fun little v-neck t-shirt with strappy bits around the collar – pale purple, since we're being specific. Something clinked onto the bathroom tile as I was re-packing my uniform. Almost dreading it, I reached down and picked up that weird little velvet pouch. Feeling more my quirky self after the shower, I felt the need to say, "You need to quit being so accident prone. Falling out all over the place is a good way to get lost, you know."

The pouch did what pouches do. It sat in my hand, silent and slightly heavy. Putting it to one side, I repacked my bag. Once everything else was arranged to my liking, I reached down and picked up the pouch. Feeling an odd little push, I moved it into the left leg-pocket of my shorts. The pouch's contents clicked merrily as I cantered my way down the stairs. I secured my still-damp hair into a dripping pony-tail as I dropped my stuff in the front hall. My mom was waiting for me in the kitchen.

"You look more like yourself," she commented as I picked up a knife and started quartering tomatoes for the salad.

I said nothing and kept chopping.

"Did something happen?" she asked, wiping her hands on the seat of her jeans shorts, and reaching for a pair of pink polka-dotted oven mitts.

I shrugged. "I don't know what you mean."

"You have a scrape on each shin."

I looked down, and saw that she was right. "Oh that," I replied, "some animal darted out in front of my bike on the way home."

"As you like," she said in her enigmatic way, before pulling some biscuits out of the toaster-oven on the counter. "Anyway," she continued, changing the subject. "Jessie says they're on their way now. They should be here by six."

"Huzzah!" I twirled my knife in mock celebration.

"Don't be like that. You love your sister, and you love her kids."

I sighed. "Yeah, but that doesn't mean I have to *like* them."

"Except you do that as well," my mother chided me, "Once you've finished on the salad, can you go out and light the barbecue?"

"Sure thing."

Dinner, as it turned out, was shrimp and corn-on-the-cob, with some chicken breasts marinated in a lemon-pepper glaze that melted in my mouth. The biscuits were buttermilk, the salad was fresh from Mom's kitchen garden, and she'd even contrived a spectacular strawberry shortcake for dessert, despite the heat and the fact that strawberry season was over a month passed. Mom definitely had a magic in the kitchen that few could match. She'd taught me a lot, but there was some *spark* that I guess could only be genetic. As her adopted daughter, I guess I just missed out on that front.

Jessie and her three boys, aged 10, 8, and 3 (surprise!) had arrived about 30-minutes ahead of schedule. The boys had run around Mom's back yard, leaving water balloon shards scattered in all directions, and nearly extinguishing the barbecue on at least two separate occasions. Jackson, the eldest, had been dragooned into setting the table not long after the balloons ran out, while Michael showed little Luke how to bury bits of gravel in a corner of Mom's favourite planter. 'Gramma' just watched as she talked with her two girls on the flag-stone patio. Jessie spoke of her last communication with Dan – he'd been offered a new posting closer to the city, so there was a chance he would be around more. Jessie had a stable career in the city that could not be interrupted by a military posting every four years, but Dan was too dedicated to the service to seek a discharge. Somehow they made it work. I had to admit I envied them that.

I spoke about the stream of festival-goers who'd been arriving in packs and parties at the B&B, along with the latest adventures of Cascade, my affectionately aloof tortie cat. I talked a bit about my coworker's divorce, but not much – it wasn't really my business, even if Catty brought it up whenever she could.

It was starting to get properly dark as the gathering wrapped up. I helped Mom pack up and distribute the few leftovers, loaded up my bike, and rode for home. The pouch in my pocket clicked and clinked whenever I went over a bump in the road. I came at last to the weird little rented bungalow I currently called home. I moved around a bit more than the rest of my family. When rent got too high, it was time to move on, I guess. This place had been owned by friends of my parents. They'd moved to warmer climates about five years ago. Their mortgage was paid off, so all they asked was enough to cover the taxes and utilities. I'd been living there for about two years.

The little yard was neater than my mom's, but less involved: I mowed, and did my best to keep weeds down around the perennials. That was about it.

There was a flood-light over the detached garage that was on a motion-censor, which clicked on just as I rolled into the driveway. Dismounting, I quickly punched in the code to open the garage door, and stowed my bicycle inside. Slapping the button to close it up behind me, I turned and walked down the patio-stone path up to the front door.

Cascade was waiting in the entrance as I came in the door. She gave me a howl of reproach before trotting down to the kitchen, across the hall. Turning once, she chirped again to make sure I was following like an obedient food-ape. Dropping my bag in the door-less closet area, I moved towards the kitchen. Sure enough, there was a ring of food around the edges of Cascade's dish, and an embarrassing bare circle of ceramic in the middle. Heaving a sigh, I leaned down to "do the magic", shaking the dish so that the kibbles once-again covered the entirety of the bottom of the dish. I'd top it up in a minute, once I'd gotten myself sorted out.

“Better?” I asked, heading down the hall to my bedroom. Cascade’s face was already sniffing the adjusted contents, so I left her to it.

The lights were off in my bedroom, so I dropped my keys on the dresser by the door, and moved into the room to close the curtains. Only once the darkness of outside was safely banished did I bother to turn on a light. I quickly emptied my pockets, placing everything on a square dish in the middle of my dresser. I cursed softly when I realized that I’d left my phone in my bag by the door. I puttered around a bit more before donning my pyjamas and heading towards the living room. It struck me then just *how many* steps there were that stood between me getting home and me settling in for an evening. Back to the front hallway I went: retrieved the bag, brought the leftovers to the kitchen, brought my uniform into the bathroom to hang over the back of the door: the steam from my morning shower would take care of the worst of the creases. I could wash it properly on my next day off, which was tomorrow. Then, and only then, did I pull my phone from the front pocket of the bag. I was about to set it on the wireless charger when the screen came to life...

“*Fifty messages?*” I exclaimed, startling Cascade from her doze on the couch. I settled beside her and scritched her ears as I scanned briefly through them. There was one from my mom, making sure I’d gotten home okay, one from my sister filling me in on some minor detail that must’ve come up in conversation this evening. Two were from my dad, who was on his way back from a fishing trip with a bunch of his buddies. The rest were from Catty. Looking a little more closely, it seemed there was some sort of drama happening with a few of the guests. Catty was reaching out about to have me sort it out for her. I debated texting back with my answers, but thought it might be a better idea to just get it all sorted out in one phone call.

Clicking on Catty’s number, I scowled as the connection dropped almost immediately. Bars looked decent, so what the deuce? I clicked the link again – this time I got a fast busy-tone. Catty must be using her phone at the moment. Scrolling through my contacts to the entry for “Work”, I clicked on the number for the front desk. Surely, something important enough to blow up my phone would garner more attention than *this*.

The ring tone sounded twice before the automated routing system came on, the pleasantly bland female voice giving instructions on which selection to make out of the “new and updated” menu options. I quickly punched zero, knowing that it would route me straight to the reception counter – a lot of systems had this default in place.

Just as the phone started to ring again, I got the double “boop-boop” noise that indicated an incoming call. Pulling the phone from my ear, I saw that it was Catty calling me back, and scrambled to answer it. I managed a harried “hello?” before the line clicked. Suddenly, a strange, raspy voice that sounded like dry twigs scraping on glass came over the phone:

"The queen lives! The queen lives! Break the curse, lest she destroy the firmament with untamed fire!"

"Who the *fuck*!?" I shouted back.

The phone went dead. Then my phone's battery dropped to zero, and the screen went black.

Feeling suddenly uneasy, I got up and armed the alarm-system for the house. Normally, I didn't bother until I was ready to go to sleep. Tonight it felt extra important that I secure my perimeter. I'd never been one to fear the dark, or being alone. I'd discovered long ago that I was one of the lucky ones who'd never had an encounter that had frightened me. Oh, there had been creeps before, but always in places where I felt I could handle myself – public transit, rando's on the street. At the bar for Jessie's bachelorette, there'd been that one weird guy who'd looked like a troll, fresh from under a bridge, who'd kept making faces at me the entire night. Maybe I'm just oblivious, maybe not, but I'd never felt this level of unease before tonight.

Looking down at my phone's screen – scratched across the glass from the back of an earring – I realized just how alone I was, and for one of the first times since I'd moved out of my parents' house, I felt *very, very* vulnerable.

Plopping the phone onto the wireless charger, I moved to the kitchen and fixed myself a snack before settling onto the couch, and flipping on the TV. I found a good nature documentary, and snuggled under the crocheted blanket, ready to get cozy and watch animals eat each other in my landlords' crystal-clear high definition.

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The darkness was limned with a cool silver mist that tickled across the filmy bit of nothing that covered my body. My skin rose in goose-bumps, sending strangely delightful shivers up to my hair and down to my loins. Walking forward on bare feet, I looked around as the mist continued to swirl about me.

A distant reddish glow pierced the sensual gloom – as I drew nearer, it grew to be a cozy fire in a white-stone hearth. A shaggy brown rug lay before it, and my fingers tingled with the need to feel its texture between them. There were other vague shadows of furniture at the edges of my awareness, but most of my attention was drawn to the man who stood, his profile limned in the warm fire-light.

He was big. Tall and broad-shouldered. His hair hung in a dark curtain down his bare back. His skin was the colour of pecan shells, and his whole bearing made me feel both alert and shy at the same time. The mists swirled around my ankles as my bare feet finally touched the rug. The fine tufts of fur tickled my toes, and the ridiculous garment I wore slid partway down one shoulder as I drew towards the man.

"So it is you, then?" he said, his voice a delicious rumble.

"I have done what was required," I replied. The words lacked context, but my brain seemed to allow for this part of the script. It had a tendency to alter events in dreams that didn't suit my tastes. This, it turned out, was totally fine.

"Will you bring them to me?"

"In time." My answer was cheeky, even for me. I moved towards the man, as familiar with him in this dream as I was a stranger to this whole scene. Dream-me skimmed a bold hand along his shoulder and down to his wrist. "Will you not look upon me, then?"

His head twitched slightly, as if he'd started the motion and then checked himself. "I dare not," he answered, his eyes never leaving the fire.

"Do you mind if I touch you all the same?" I asked.

"Do as you please," was his answer.

Taking that as all the invitation I needed, I reached both my hands up and stroked his broad back. The skin was smooth and soft and I felt his muscles shiver as I moved my palms in gentle circles. He tensed, and then gave a small grunt as I reached up to run my fingers through the silky hair along his scalp, digging my nails in gently along the base of his skull. The heat of the fire and the warmth of his body were temptation itself. My brain gave one last mental shrug before throwing all caution to the wind. Drawing closer, I put my arms around his chest, and kissed his back and shoulders. When I found a particularly ticklish spot, I gave a little nip that made him jump a little.

"Like that?" I asked.

"You may torment me here. I will allow it," was all he said in reply.

The mist swirled between us, obscuring his face as he turned. His strong arms came around me, and he pulled me up to my toes. My lips found his, and it was the most delicious kiss I'd ever shared with another being. His mouth was hot and his lips moved over mine, branding me. There was a rasp of stubble on his upper lip that scratched at my skin as he deepened the kiss, drawing me closer to him. The satiny material of the pants that he wore left no illusions about how he felt about our meeting. Still, the common-sense part of my mind wondered at the intensity of sensation capable in the dream of someone who'd been celibate for a few years. Dream-me behaved as if Common-sense-me wasn't even there. Her / my hands were all over the man's chest and arms, reaching up to pull him towards me. Good gravy, but I wanted to fuck this man like I wanted my next breath. I fumbled for his waist-band, looked down to see what I was doing...

The alarm on my phone tinkled its happy little wakey-wakey chime. I sat up, a single occupant in a double-bed. Cascade looked up from her perfect little doughnut sleeping pose, and chirped a question.

With a grunt and groan, I lay back down, and buried my head in the pillow.