

# H A I N T E D

J ⊕ R D A N L . H A W K

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Edited by Annetta Ribken

*To all of my friends who enthusiastically supported me when I announced I was going to write  
gay romance. I couldn't have done it without you.*

## Chapter 1

Dan walked slowly across the uneven backyard toward the lightning-struck oak. Clouds covered the moon and stars, and the rising wind brought with it the scent of rain falling from one mountain over. The only light flickered from the ring of votive candles he'd set out earlier and the lone bulb shining through the kitchen window behind him.

He paused to look back at the house, scanning the windows for any signs of movement. He'd told Bea to take Virgil into the root cellar until it was over, but his brother and sister were at the age where curiosity might get the better of good sense.

Virgil had already seen things no nine-year-old ought to, and Dan didn't intend to add to the list.

There was no sign of life in the house. Bea had brains, for all that she was only a couple years older than Virgil. She'd known what Dan was about, while Virgil just cried and made a fuss.

Virgil cried a lot lately. They all did.

Dan realized he was still staring at the house, putting off what had to be done. His fingers tightened on the wand in his hand, making the charms tied to it jingle and clink. Three feet of solid oak, the wand was cut from the very tree in front of him. Soft deerskin wrapped one end, while the other was capped with an antler, the longer of its two prongs curving to form a vicious hook.

Forcing himself to face the oak, he began to walk again, his steps slow and measured. The tiny light of the candles only illuminated the lowest branches, but he heard the upper ones tossing in the breeze, creaking and rubbing against each other like something alive, the leaves turning the wind into the whisper of a thousand voices.

He'd laid out a circle of salt near sundown, complete except for a gap just wide enough for a single person to pass. Stepping through, he took a handful of salt from the tool belt slung around his hips and used it to close the circle behind him.

"Let nothing cross this line; let the spirits within be contained. So mote it be." The words—and, more importantly, the will behind them—completed the circle. *At least if I fail, Dad—*

No. *The haint*. If he failed, the haint would be confined to the tree for as long as the circle lasted. It would give Bea and Virgil time to get to the neighbors, before the haint could get loose and come looking for them.

The wind picked up, blowing strands of his shoulder-length hair into his face. Holding his wand protectively in front of him, he moved closer to the massive tree, half of which was twisted and dead from a lightning strike. The crow skull tied to the wand rattled, independent of the wind or any tremor in his hand. The other charms started up, too, the sound like a rattlesnake's warning buzz. The mojo bag he always carried in the front pocket of his jeans shifted, like a small animal burrowing close. The silver pentagram around his neck grew ice cold.

The flickering light of the four votive candles, set in each one of the cardinal directions, revealed something in the midst of the low branches. Something large and dark, swinging back and forth in the breeze. There came the creak of a taut rope rubbing against bark, like the soft cry of a child.

Even though he had expected it, the sight of the figure dangling from the tree was like falling into an icy mountain creek, shocking him into numbness. For a minute, he was back on that awful day, before the ambulances had come to take the body away.

*Breathe. The memory of Mom's voice comforted him, even as it made his throat tight with grief. Ground. Center. Shield. Concentrate. Focus on what's in front of you right now, on the job at hand. The rest can sort itself out later.*

The end of the creaking rope was tied into a noose and looped tightly around the neck of the dangling figure. The stink of rot and shit wafted from the haint, accompanied by a teasing whisper of Old Spice. As the wind blew, the body rotated. He saw the face: swollen and purple in death, the tongue protruding between dry lips, the eyes half-sunk back into the head. In each socket glowed a tiny, pale light.

The eyes of the dead.

Thin tendrils of black energy uncoiled from the haint, striking like copperheads at Dan's aura, which flared indigo under the assault. He'd been ready for this, his aura slick and hard as he could make it. Most of the tendrils slipped off like knives against armor.

But he already had part of this haint inside him: in his blood, his bones, his very cells. Where a normal haint might never reach him, this one found the cracks made by loss, by grief, by the tiny little voice whispering: *please, Daddy, don't leave me*. A few tendrils wriggled through like dark maggots, sinking into him before he could react.

*I can't go on. Despair hit him, hard enough it made him dizzy. I can't do this. Take care of the farm, take care of Bea and Virgil, all by myself? I'm a college sophomore; I don't know how to run a business or be a parent.*

*They left me. How could you do that, Mom? How could you?*

The grief and loss he'd lived with since Samhain seemed to swell, to become uncontrollable—unbearable. His wand fell from his hand. It felt like too much effort to pick it up again. *What difference does it make? What difference does anything make?*

Something tightened around his neck, cutting off his breath.

*Fuck oh fuck oh fuck!*

He clawed wildly at the ghostly noose, but it was too late—he'd fallen into the haint's trap and it had him now. His physical fingers encountered only skin, but he could *feel* the rough fibers of the rope, accompanied by the oily slickness of the haint's psychic tendrils.

Black spots danced in front of his eyes. From the shadows of the lightning-struck oak, the haint let out a hollow groan. Dan looked up, but saw only those two burning eyes, lonely and desperate in death, wanting Dan to join him.

Dan tore his gaze away. His dimming sight fell across something near one of the votive candles. Virgil had left his bike laying in the yard, despite being told to put it away earlier, and now the rear reflector caught the candlelight and held it like a steady, red eye.

*Virgil. If Dan died here tonight, what would happen to his brother and sister? Maybe he couldn't fill their parents' shoes, but he was still all they had.*

His searching fingers found the leather-wrapped end of the wand deep in the overgrown grass. With the very last of his strength, he gripped the wand and surged to his feet. The training Mom had pounded into him year after year took over; his arm swung in an arc with all his weight behind it.

The point of the antler stabbed deep into the haint's forehead, directly between the glowing eyes.

"Hecate, Lady of the Crossroads, Queen of Ghosts, open the way!" he gasped, with what little breath remained in his lungs.

The haint flailed, body jerking and dancing. The psychic tendrils curled back from Dan like the legs of a dying spider. The whole thing began to dissolve into putrid black goo, dripping into

a puddle on the ground, until nothing was left.

A dark circle hung in the air, where the antler had pierced the haint's forehead, blacker even than the night sky. It grew larger, seeming to form the mouth of a cave, and Dan heard the baying of hounds in the distance. Something like a mist passed through the opening, pushed by Dan's will and drawn by the hand of the Goddess.

Then there was nothing but the ordinary night, the flickering light of the candles, and the empty, wind-tossed tree.

Dan dropped to his knees, gasping for breath. The tip of the antler dug into the ground.

*Fuck. Oh fuck.*

*I killed him. I killed Dad.*

And even though he knew it wasn't right, that what he'd done was give his father peace at last, it still felt like truth.

Wanting to get as far away from the oak as he could, he staggered to his feet and looked down at the black residue, which was all that remained of the haint. He automatically tossed a handful of salt from his pouch onto it. It began to bubble and shrink, the earth absorbing anything he missed. Moving slowly, every joint aching, he went to each quarter and dismissed the energies there, blowing out the votive candles.

When he was done, he stepped back over the line of salt and looked over his shoulder at the tree. *There. It's done.*

*He's really gone now. It's just me.*

Turning away from the tree, Dan walked slowly back in the direction of the old farmhouse and the life awaiting him there.

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