

Chapter One

No woman woke up with a song in her heart and the words “What a great day for a mammogram!” on her lips.

Normally, I didn’t mind appointments at the end of the day, but by the time I got to the clinic at 5:30PM, I’d missed lunch tracking down a recalcitrant professor with answers about a client’s cursed amulet, my second double espresso was a regret on par with the time I gave myself bangs, and my water-resistant boots were soaked from the November downpour.

The only other patient at the small imaging clinic leaned over the counter, squinting at a screen and debating times for follow-up appointments two years in the future. A yawning employee nudged the plastic waiting room chairs back into place, smiling sheepishly when I yawned too.

The soft lights, warmth, and soothing blue walls were making me zone out, my head drooping and my eyelids heavy.

“Tovah Silver?” A petite blonde in teddy bear scrubs peered at me over a chart.

I stood up, blinking off my languor. “Yup. Hi.”

“Hi! I’m Piper. What a day, huh? Better start collecting two of every animal.” The radiology technician led me down a bland beige wood corridor past a large print of an orca leaping out of the water, all while chattering with the enthusiasm of a multilevel marketer nailing her Caribbean cruise bonus.

I smiled and nodded along to her small talk, my squelching footsteps leaving damp prints on the linoleum. This would all be over soon. Ten minutes of boob mauling, then dinner and a hot bath to round out my day.

That still ranked above my first time in college.

Piper led me to the changing cubicles and had me remove all my clothing from my upper body. I shrugged out of my military-style rain jacket, rust-colored sweater, and bra, and folded them neatly on the chair, exchanging them for a hospital gown.

The exam room was standard-issue modern medical. More warm lighting and calm colors, posters stressing the importance of regular screenings, the faint hum of equipment, and a mammography machine that gave off big medieval interrogation energy. The only personal touch was a photo of a golden retriever on the small desk.

I draped the hospital gown over the chair in the corner.

Did other women feel compelled to act ridiculously nonchalant, hanging out topless in dark denim while their technician adjusted the mammography machine? My brain, helpful as ever, chose this moment to overthink how arms worked. Where did I normally place them and why did everything feel wrong and weird when I did it shirtless?

I'd landed on loosely folded when Piper motioned me over. I hoisted my breast onto the bottom tray, spurring the other woman into action, smoothing and flattening the tissue to arrange my boob like a throw pillow.

"The pastry chef who lost last night on *Bake Off* could have used some of your technique," I joked.

Piper laughed and smushed the top tray down on my poor appendage via the control buttons on the side of the machine with as much gentleness as was possible. "I actually knead dough to relax."

"And why not? You end up with yummy bread and no bitching patients," I said.

"The whiny ones are the worst." She tapped another button and the plates hummed softly into place. "I make the compression paddles just a smidge too tight with those ones."

I cracked a grin. "Please tell me you're not kidding. Because that would be awesome."

"That would be totally unprofessional," she said with a slight smile as she headed to the console behind the protective barrier.

"That's not a no," I sang out.

A coworker called out "Night, Piper" from the hallway, adding that she'd lock the door behind her.

"I have you in my clutches now." Piper twirled an imaginary mustache. "No one to hear you scream."

"Scream?" I shook my head. "Someone's getting ahead of herself. At least buy me dinner first. Though to be fair, you've already gotten to second base."

Piper chuckled. "I'm scared to ask what you consider a date. Now stop laughing. I need you totally still. Deep breath and hold."

After capturing the intro-level X-rays, we moved on to the harder angles. Piper spun the machine sideways, positioning me with my chest thrust out.

"Worst *Playboy* pose ever," I said, fanning myself against a hot flash.

“Well, if you’re not going to pout, that’s on you. Shuffle in, get nice and close.” She pressed my left arm up along the machine like I was the shy bride in an arranged marriage who wouldn’t cozy up for the wedding photo. “Just like that. Perfect!”

“I don’t think that means what you think it means,” I murmured. Sweat ran down the back of my neck, and the machine had such a clamp on my throbbing boob that I chided myself for not setting a safe word.

Piper captured the image. “One more then you’ll be released back into the wilds.”

“Am I supposed to be a fish in this situation?” I frowned. “Good thing I don’t actually have a hot date tonight, because between my boobs requiring time to reinflate and you disparaging my non-centerfold vibe, my ego is sorely wounded.”

Piper cut her eyes at me. “Somehow, I get the sense your ego is just fine.”

I flipped my hair. “Yeah, I rock.”

She reset the machine to X-ray my other side: right arm flung up, right boob trapped.

I breathed through a spike of anxiety. I’d had night terrors as a kid, and even decades later, being pinned in place brought back that same frozen panic.

Deep breath. This isn’t the same—

The door crashed open and a stocky figure lurched in like a marionette freed from his strings. My body clocked the danger before my brain processed his ratty denim jacket and jeans, his face obscured by a baseball cap pulled low, and the heavy leather gloves on his hands.

I squinted at the crude slash of a mouth carved into clay and blinked.

A golem? In a mammography clinic? Golems were the servants of the wealthy, staffing west side cocktail parties and boardrooms. They cost too much for any healthcare provider to afford, unless it was some private facility by the seaside where the very upper crust went to recover.

He locked on to me. Sure, I was a vision of raw, clamped sexuality, but seriously? Get lost, perv.

Piper planted herself between us. “Get out!”

He loomed closer.

I struggled against the machine. “Piper. Help!”

She barely managed three steps toward me before the golem grabbed her arm and twisted it up behind her back. She whimpered.

“Let her go!” I flailed for the chunky yellow emergency release lever, but pinned sideways against the cold machine as I was, the mechanism was out of reach. I slid off my black leather belt with its wide silver buckle, but no matter how I whipped it at the lever, even using my dominant hand, the belt didn’t have the heft to move it.

There was nothing in range for me to throw and no one to come to our rescue.

My hot flash crept along my chest and the back of my neck, my throat growing tight and prickly.

Piper clearly didn’t have magic, but she wasn’t going down without a fight. She stomped on his foot, and when the golem didn’t react, she elbowed him in the face with her free arm, knocking off his baseball cap.

In my limited experience, golems possessed the same facial structure and features as humans. This one looked like someone had gotten bored halfway through: no lashes or brows, pinprick nostrils, eyes that weren’t much more than marbles.

Her actions hadn’t harmed the golem, but he’d been startled enough to let her go. She jumped back, rubbing the arm he’d twisted, though it didn’t appear dislocated or broken. But he sprang back into action, hauling her back against his chest with his arm pressed against her throat.

Barbed heat dotted my skin and the pressure in my chest grew unbearable. Still stuck in the mammography machine, I wrapped the belt around my knuckles. “Come here, you piece of shit.”

The golem tilted his head and squeezed his forearm, cutting off Piper’s air flow—almost like he was waiting to see what I’d do next.

She gave a strangled gurgle, desperate eyes flashing in my direction.

“Yo!” I snapped my fingers. “Discount garden gnome. Did your maker give you the balls to take me on?”

The golem flung Piper away and rumbled toward me.

Ignoring my heart pounding, I held the swelling ball of heat in my core in check while the golem came closer. I didn’t dare take my eyes off him to check on Piper.

Five steps.

I exhaled gently—just the low setting—to suss things out. Magic-infused hot air splashed against his skin, yet he didn’t falter.

Three steps.

Two...

I snapped the belt at the golem. A lion tamer hat would have completed the moment nicely.

The golem yanked the leather away, resulting in his arm half raised above his head.

Exactly where I wanted it.

I unleashed the tightness in my chest.

My torso burst into white-gold flames that licked along my arms. I whipped a thin stream of fire at the golem's arm and sheared it clean off. Catching his limb before it hit the ground, I slapped it against the emergency release lever, freeing myself.

Hot flash magic—not exactly the stuff of legend, but it had its moments.

I ducked low and bolted past him toward Piper, who was crumpled against the wall, hunched over her ankle.

He grabbed my hair with his remaining hand and swung me around by the head. I screamed a vicious curse, strands tearing free from my scalp.

Golems stuck with a task until it was complete. If his task was murdering me, I had no intention of helping him earn a gold star.

The air conditioning kicked in, puckering my boobs with goose bumps. Great. Now I was flushed, sweaty, *and* cold. I was one symptom away from qualifying as a hostile weather event. I glanced over at the discarded hospital gown, then planted myself in an unmovable stance.

Screw modesty. I was channeling full Boudica energy now—bare-chested, blazing, and absolutely done with this day. Jaw locked, I dragged the fire banding my chest inward, packing it hard and mean behind my ribs. Then I opened my mouth and screamed fire into his face. The gold darkened, the flames now edged in red—a raw blast of heat and fury.

A *quick* raw blast. I wasn't a fire elemental. My magic sputtered out faster than I'd have liked, leaving me doubled over, coughing, but I'd still pushed his clay past its breaking point.

His head had turned glassy and slumped like overfired pottery collapsing in a kiln. Soot-stained half-molten clay and water ran in rivulets down the golem's body, and smoke poured from his neck stump.

"Fire. Fire," a feminine voice intoned over and over with agonizing robotic calm.

The sprinklers kicked in, dousing us. Excellent. It would dial down the lingering hot flash and perk me up since my assault had drained me.

Or rather, it would have been excellent, had the golem not grabbed my throat with one meaty hand and squeezed.

Huh? Being headless should have been a dealbreaker. I tore at his hand to no avail.

My vision blurred; my lungs burned. Trapped, boobs-out: this could not be how I was found dead. A life tragically cut short in my mid-forties turned into a punchline in news reports. Or worse. Years of my mother visiting my grave to kvetch about the shame I'd brought upon her.

There was only one option. The full nuclear one I'd kept hidden at all costs. Having only one kind of magic was fine. To possess two was forbidden. An anathema punishable by a magical lobotomy and a one-way trip to a windowless black site. All for the crime of being too much.

Well, I had to live long enough to worry about that.

I didn't summon fire. Anyone could burn the outside of a thing. What I was about to do went somewhere else entirely.

The golem squeezed tighter.

I saw red. This wasn't panic. It wasn't even the familiar, sweaty build of a hot flash.

A pressure detonated behind my rib cage along with a brutal tightness, like someone had cinched a too-small band around my ribs and was still cranking.

Light-headed, with my eardrums feeling like they were about to burst, I slammed my palms against the golem and melted his chest into a gooey mess.

That was just cover. The real move was quieter and far less legal. I reached inside the golem to burn out the magic animating him.

Given how easy it'd be to permanently solve any problems with assholes in the magic community this way, my usual restraint was frankly heroic and underappreciated.

The delicious rush of unleashing that deeper magic danced through me, better than taking off a too-tight bra or finally standing in front of a fan. It hit my system like a shot of high-proof whiskey in a burning, golden rush of satisfaction.

The animation magic that made the golem more than a mud sculpture tasted sharp and metallic, a lightning burst on my tongue. For a split second I seized with the shock of it, then I incinerated it.

He hit the ground with a dull thud, and I dragged in a shaky, wheezing breath.

And somehow, worst of all, Piper stared at me from a heap in the corner, eyes wide, cradling her ankle.

I froze. Did she know what I'd done?

That whole “scratch the Hebrew letter aleph off a golem’s forehead so the word ‘emet’—truth—became ‘met’—death—and boom, instant off switch”? That was the child-simple version. I could tattoo “emet” on a potato and it wouldn’t stand up and do my laundry.

Real animation magic didn’t sit in one letter waiting to be vandalized by a thumbnail. It was baked into the marrow of an object, braided through name, will, and power in every inch of clay.

A fire elemental could stop a golem if they incinerated one down to a lump. I’d been certain that melting his head would be enough. I’d been wrong.

Hence, we’d gone with plan B: burn the magic out at its core. And it had been a success.

Or so I’d thought before I clocked Piper’s hollow stare.

Well, I certainly wasn’t going to have that conversation topless. “Be right back,” I said, going for the changing cubicle and my sweater.

My neck was tender and it hurt to swallow, but mostly I needed a moment to rid myself of the golem’s phantom strangulation. I still felt his fingers clamped around my throat along with the primal certainty that I couldn’t breathe, even though I could.

“Tovah?” Piper said in a wavery voice.

Pull it together, Silver.

I plastered on my best “everything is under control” face. It was going to have to be the performance of a lifetime. I just hoped I wasn’t the only one buying it.