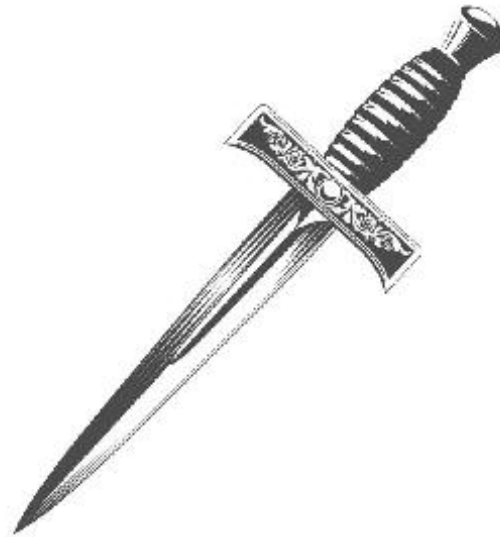




DEMON RELIC HUNTER

RILEY CRUZ: BOOK ONE
L.A. MCBRIDE



DEMON RELIC HUNTER

RILEY CRUZ: BOOK ONE

L.A. MCBRIDE

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For my husband Chris who listens to my schemes, talks me out of felonies, and doesn't give me grief even when I dedicate a book to the dog before him. Thank you for being my rock.

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FOREWORD

This series takes place in the same world as the Kali James series. Each series can be read independently. Although every effort has been made to avoid major spoilers, the events in this book overlap with those of Kali's series and include some shared details.

CHAPTER 1



Temptation came with a double shot of whiskey and a rumor of a magical dagger. For eight years, I'd kept my hands clean and my adventures limited to karaoke nights and barbecue joints. And I, in turn, got to live the typical twenty-four-year-old life—relatively carefree but ramen-noodle broke.

Despite the years away from my former life, the thrill of a good heist was still hard-wired into me. Tonight, I found myself leaning in to listen to the dark-eyed stranger on the bar stool across from me. While I served him drinks, he'd been regaling me with tales of a magical dagger he'd spotted for sale on a dark web auction site.

He was a big man, but in a place like this, that was more the norm than the exception. He hunched his shoulders and hid inside the hood of his red sweatshirt. But when he spoke of the dagger, he leaned in, eyes lit with intensity. Given his fascination with magical objects, my money was on him being a witch.

"A lot of powerful people will be after something like that," he said.

Ignoring the familiar buzz of excitement at the thought of stealing it out from under their noses, I mumbled a noncommittal "hmm." *I'm not that girl anymore.* I pointed to his empty shot glass. "You want another?"

At his nod, I reached for the whiskey bottle. I moved closer to him, bracing myself for the smell. As a shifter, my

nose was sensitive, but this guy had doused himself in more cologne than a teenage boy who'd just discovered Axe body spray. It was enough to make even a human's eyes water.

He leaned closer while I poured. His fingers brushed against mine as he reached for his glass. I barely managed to keep the grimace off my face at the unwanted touch.

"According to my source, that dagger is going to spark a bidding war. It's the real deal." He dropped his voice to a husky whisper. "Powerful magic, too."

The rarer the supposed magic, the more high rollers would be after it. That meant a fat payday for someone. "What kind of magic?" *Just making polite conversation*, I told myself.

A smile ghosted his lips, gone as fast as it appeared. "It's said to cloak its owner in darkness, and," he whispered conspiratorially, "it can kill anyone."

I snorted and put the whiskey back on the shelf. "Most daggers can."

"Not like this." He glanced around the room until his gaze paused on the table of werewolves sharing a pitcher of cheap beer. "It can slice through a wolf's hide like butter." He picked up his glass and held it to his lips. "Or turn a vamp to ash." He downed his shot.

I glanced around the bar, but no one paid us any attention. Plenty of our regulars were supernaturals, but we also got a steady stream of humans without a clue who they were drinking next to. When I turned back to the man, he was watching me expectantly.

"Well, I'm sure some rich bastard will pay a pretty penny to display it on his wall." My voice was light but my footsteps heavy as I forced myself to walk away.

I needed to concentrate on something other than a dagger that would fetch enough on the magical underground market to buy my whole apartment building with plenty to spare. I made my way to the other end of the bar.

I was chatting with Dez, a regular, when a trio of sorority sisters sidled up to order drinks. The women had perfectly

straightened hair, coordinated tops, and laughs that grated more than the death metal some dick had put on the jukebox. After giving the women a once-over, Dez leaned over the bar, tipping over his full Bloody Mary. Thanks to better-than-average reflexes, he caught the drink, but not before it splashed red all over my clean bar top. Dez ignored the spill and motioned me closer.

He gave the women the side eye. “Margaritas,” he guessed.

“Not a chance.” I mopped up his mess. “Jell-O shots.” I grinned when he swore under his breath.

Dez and I liked to play a betting game, guessing which frou-frou drinks the college crowd was about to order. So far, I was up three-to-one. At the end of the night, the winner was going home twenty bucks richer.

Thanks to a decade working cyber security, Dez looked like the smart computer geek he was. Dez, who after one too many drinks a few weeks ago confessed his name was short for Desmond, was decked out in his typical button-down shirt and black-framed glasses. As a recently turned vampire, he didn’t need the glasses. I suspected he wore them, like the clothes, as a reminder of who he had once been.

Dez wasn’t exactly a model vampire. He went light-headed at the first sight of blood. Instead of tapping a vein like most vampires, Dez resorted to drinks spiked with a little O positive, which was why he spent so much time camped out on my bar stools.

The Sundowner was the kind of dive bar that attracted an eclectic crowd. A typical Saturday like tonight saw a steady influx of the rough-and-tumble type, alongside supernaturals like Dez looking for a cheap drink and colorful company. It was also where college students came to walk on the wild side.

The three women at the bar nudged each other until a brunette with fake eyelashes the length of cat whiskers stepped forward. “Do you have a drink menu?”

Does this look like a place that has a drink menu? “We’ve got all the regular drinks. Order whatever you like.” I hoped

she picked something in a bottle.

The woman frowned before returning to confer with her friends. All three of them stopped to stare when the last person I wanted to deal with tonight sauntered into the bar like he owned it. I squared my shoulders and met his arctic blue eyes, noting the tension that tightened his jaw the moment he spotted me.

Max Volkov was the local alpha. He was also everything I avoided—an egotistical predator who thought his money and power entitled him to meddle in everyone’s business, including mine. With those flashing eyes and chiseled body, Max Volkov was as shiny as any artifact I’d ever stolen and twice as dangerous. Coveting pretty, expensive things was what landed me in trouble in the first place. I needed to keep my distance.

One of Volkov’s werewolves got his attention before he could head my way. My mood brightened.

The college girls nudged each other. “Who is that?” the blonde asked me, her gaze never straying from Volkov.

“Who?” I played dumb. The man might be hot, but that didn’t mean I was going to feed his ego by sending a fan club his way.

The woman narrowed her eyes. When I kept my expression blank, she waved her hand. “You know what, never mind.” She scanned me from the top of my pink hair down to the ratty band t-shirt I had on, curling her lip. “I doubt you’d know someone like him.”

I ignored her dig. “What’ll it be?” I cupped my hand to my ear, so I could hear over the death metal.

“Sex-on-the-beach,” the blonde yelled.

Dez and I groaned at the same time, but I nodded before reaching for my phone. Even though I’d been bartending off and on for the past few years, I was quite possibly the world’s worst bartender. The only drinks I could make from memory involved a splash of liquor and a Coke. Fortunately, this wasn’t the kind of bar where people ordered a lot of cocktails.

On the occasions they did, I had a pocket-sized drink wizard handy.

I tapped my phone to pull up the browser but got nothing but a black screen. I pushed the on button and shook the screen to no avail. *I knew I should have charged it.*

I turned back to the women who were now attempting to chat up Dez. “How about Jell-O shots?” I called hopefully, thinking of the premade batch waiting in the fridge.

The brunette frowned and shook her head. “No. We want sex-on-the-beach.” All three women burst into giggles.

I rolled my eyes just as my ill-tempered boss pushed his way through the growing crowd to join me behind the bar. “Is there a problem?” He glowered at me.

I glanced down at my deader-than-dead phone before tucking it in the back pocket of my ripped jeans. “No problem.”

Like most of the staff, Hopper wasn’t human, although he was tight-lipped about what he was. All I knew was that he didn’t smell like a shifter. Hopper’s real name was Mark, but his eyes bugged out like a grasshopper when he got mad, earning him the nickname. No one else used it to his face. I did it on the regular.

Hopper managed the Sundowner, and he had it out for me since the owner hired me without consulting him. Or it might have been because of my absolute shit bartending skills. I liked to think my sparkling personality more than made up for my lack of drink-mixing know how.

Hopper had been looking for a reason to fire me for weeks. I needed the cash to pay my rent, which meant playing nice. The Sundowner was one of the few places that would pay me under the table, so I could stay out of the system, a necessity for avoiding my old pack hunting me down. I plastered on a smile and reached for three tall glasses. Satisfied, Hopper hustled into the back room where he could double check inventory to make sure I hadn’t mucked it up in his absence.

I eyed the array of liquor bottles. *How hard could it be to make a sex-on-the-beach, anyway?* I decided to go with my instincts. They rarely failed me.

I considered my options, humming a catchy pop tune as I reached for the Fireball. *Something spicy.* I filled the glasses half full because, really, who wanted tepid sex-on-the-beach? I added several splashes of Tabasco sauce for good measure. Next, I dumped in some peach schnapps and a healthy shot of grenadine to each glass. *Something sweet.*

After checking to make sure Hopper was still in the back, I dipped my finger in one of the drinks and brought it to my lips for a taste test. *Delicious. If this wasn't how this drink was made, it should be.* It was so damned good, they should name it after me. The Riley Cruz, aka Sex-on-the-Beach. It had a nice ring to it.

The drink still needed something. *Of course. What would sex on the beach be without a big finish?* I shook a can of compressed whipped cream before topping off the glasses with a generous mound of it. I stuck a little umbrella in each drink and sat them on the bar with a wide grin.

The women stared at the drinks dubiously and then at each other. The brunette pointed. "Umm, what is that?"

"House special." I threw out the standard line I used for any drinks that deviated from boring that's-how-everyone-makes-it territory. I nudged the glass closer to her. "Go on. Try it. You'll love it," I assured her, waggling my eyebrows.

"Okay," she said, waiting for her friends to pick up their glasses. They clinked them together and downed their drinks.

Hopper came out of the back in time for the coughing fit to hit full throttle. All three women's faces were beet red, and one was gasping in big gulps of air. I moved around the bar so that I could slap her on the back, but she shrugged me off.

"What did you do?" Hopper growled at me.

I threw my hands up. "It's not my fault they can't hold their liquor."

The women glared at me but quickly went back to coughing. I handed them each a water, which they guzzled like their mouths were on fire. *Maybe I should have skipped the Tabasco.*

“Damn it, Riley.” Hopper was almost as red as the women. “What did you put in those drinks?”

I shrugged. No point in pouring gasoline on the fire.

CHAPTER 2



Max Volkov picked that moment to join the party. I was used to seeing him clad in stuffy, overpriced business suits. Tonight, he looked slightly less uptight, dressed in blue jeans and a dove gray Henley that hugged his body in all the right ways. The thought made me cranky.

Hopper got right up in my face, blocking the view. “Answer me!”

I leaned away from him to avoid the spit shower.

Volkov stepped between us, forcing Hopper to take a step back. Then he looked down at me. “Causing trouble again?”

“Oh, I’ve got it handled, sir.” Hopper straightened the collar of his shirt and cleared his throat. “What can I get you, Mr. Volkov? On the house, of course.”

I looked at Dez and faux gagged at Hopper’s blatant brown nosing.

Volkov ignored Hopper and the coughing women, the full weight of his attention on me. “We need to talk.”

“Pass,” I said cheerfully.

The last time we had a talk, it hadn’t gone well. Max Volkov seemed to think I should officially join his pack for my own good. I thought he should kiss my ass. I was a goat shifter, not one of his minions. He may be the local alpha, but he’d never be my alpha. Even though the Kansas City pack had a mix of shifters in it, I’d had enough of the pack experience to last me a lifetime.

One of the women interrupted whatever Volkov was about to say by trailing her finger up his arm and resting her hand on his bicep. He glanced down at her. She tugged the hem of her shirt until her lacy bra was visible and angled her body into his.

“Real subtle,” I mumbled.

She ignored me. “Hello.” The sexy bedroom voice was ruined by the ensuing bout of coughing. She stepped away to cover her mouth.

The woman gasped in a few lungfuls of air, swiping at her now smudged mascara. Her friends patted her back while glaring at me. I touched the corner of my lip and then pointed to where she had a bead of whipped cream clinging to hers. She shot me a nasty look before wiping it off.

Volkov was no longer watching her. “Jealous looks good on you.”

I laughed. “You’re delusional.”

Now that she’d lost Volkov’s attention, the woman turned back to the nearly empty glasses on the bar. “Those are not what we ordered,” she told Hopper.

“Sure, they are,” I countered.

The blonde behind her poked a finger in my direction. “We wanted nice fruity cocktails.”

“You ordered sex-on-the-beach,” I said.

“Look at us.” She gestured to her friends. “Sex on the beach shouldn’t leave us red-faced and choking for breath.”

I winked. “Well then, you’re not doing it right.”

Volkov surprised me by laughing, the sound as dark and rich as the whiskey we served.

Hopper lured the women away with the promise of free drinks, leaving me alone with Volkov. I did my best to ignore him despite his scent of cedarwood and spice teasing my nose. Dez swiveled on his bar stool, ready for the show.

Volkov got right to the point. “It’s not safe for you on your own. Not anymore.”

“I’ll take my chances.” Sure, there was currently some kind of demon loose in Kansas City, but when wasn’t there a big bad lurking in the shadows?

Volkov took a step closer and backed me into the bar before I planted a hand on his chest and pushed. He didn’t budge. “Look. I’ve let you do this whole”—he gestured toward the colorful tattoos snaking around my arm before staring pointedly at my bright pink hair—“rebellious thing long enough.”

I reared back. *Let me?* There was so much wrong with that statement, I didn’t even know where to begin. “If you’re not ordering, I’ve got work to do.” I moved around him, grabbing the empty glasses the women left behind.

“Soon, you and I are going to have a little sit down to resolve this.”

“Not if I can help it,” I muttered.

I watched him walk away. He stopped at the table of werewolves.

One of his shifters looked past Volkov to me. When he caught me looking, he nudged Volkov and grinned. “Enjoying the view, Cruz?”

I was going to let it go until I spotted Volkov’s smug smile.

“Sure am.” I leaned a hip against the bar. “Tell me something, alpha.” I tapped my chin. “Is that fine ass of yours a product of the gym or from clenching around that stick you’ve got wedged so far up there?”

Conversations stopped. Volkov’s smile faltered.

“My office.” Hopper was close enough I could feel his hot breath on my cheek. “Now!”

Hopper’s hands were balled into fists, his face flushed with anger. Before I could stop myself, I backed away.

No. I was never going down that path again. I yanked the towel off my shoulder and tossed it at Hopper before heading for the door. “You know what? I’m done.”

Hopper hustled to block my path. “Where do you think you’re going? No one else is going hire you off the books.”

I glanced at the stranger I’d been talking to about a magical dagger before this night went to hell. He raised his empty shot glass in a mock toast. I saluted him before stepping around Hopper.

“It looks like I’m about to go shopping.” I let the door slam shut behind me.

As soon as I entertained the idea of taking it, that magical dagger was all I could think about. *Was I really considering this?*

When I ran from my old pack as a sixteen-year-old, I’d put that life behind me—not because I had a sudden aversion to stealing from power-tripping rich assholes. I quit to ensure my own survival. If my old alpha Carl ever found me, he’d kill me with his own hands while the pack cheered him on. My last job for him had been a double-cross, and Carl wasn’t a forgiving kind of guy.

Eight years was a long time, I reasoned. I was hundreds of miles away from Santa Fe and Carl’s reach. There was no harm in checking the dagger out. I wasn’t committing to stealing it. *Yet.*

I was two blocks into the walk to my crappy apartment with its bad paint job and late rent when I turned around and headed back to the bar. I stopped at the edge of the bar parking lot. Unfortunately, Volkov’s pricey sports car was still parked behind the bar. I’d had my fill of angry men for one night. The last thing I wanted was another run-in with Volkov. To avoid him, I climbed on top of the Sundowner to wait for Dez. Because I didn’t have a clue how to get on the dark web, I needed Dez to help me find that auction.

Volkov swaggered out first. A few steps from the door, he stopped abruptly and canted his head as if scenting the air. I

swore under my breath. *Wolves and their noses.*

I flattened myself on the roof and waited for him to leave. Even if he knew I was up here, there was no way Max Volkov would be caught doing something as undignified as climbing on top of a bar. I snickered just thinking about it. When I peeked back over the edge, his car was speeding out of the lot.

I wasn't very good at the whole waiting game. By the time I spotted the top of Dez's ginger head, I'd picked a small pile of rocks out of the asphalt roof. I stretched, scattering them with my boot before I dropped to the ground next to him. Dez jumped, clutching his chest.

"Geeze bro, relax." I laughed. "I don't know if you got the memo, but you're a freaking vampire."

Dez flushed and adjusted his glasses. He looked up at the roof where I'd been perched. "What were you doing up there?"

"Waiting for you." I brushed off a rock stuck to the knee of my jeans. "Obviously."

Despite his wiry frame, Dez had vampire strength, so he didn't budge when I gave him a healthy hip bump to get him to lighten up. He did frown. "Why?"

"So suspicious," I accused. When he continued to frown, I got right to it. "Fine, I need your help."

Dez ran a hand through his messy red hair. "I can talk to Hopper, but I'm not sure he'll give you your job back without you doing a lot of groveling."

"What? No." I stuttered to a stop. "I don't want my job back."

He turned to face me, his usually warm brown eyes wary. "Then, what?"

"I need you to help me get on the dark web."

I braced myself for a lecture about the dangers of venturing into the virtual Wild West. Instead, Dez's shoulders dropped, and his eyes lit with interest. "Now, you're talking my language."

“I thought you used to work in cyber security.”

He shrugged. “Two sides. Same coin.”

I grinned. I wouldn't even have to feel guilty about corrupting Dez. “My laptop is at my apartment. We can order a couple pizzas.” At his nod, I snagged his phone and pulled up a delivery app to order a family-sized pizza, an order of breadsticks, and a dessert pizza. I showed Dez the screen. “What do you want?”

He chuckled. “I think that'll be plenty.”

I added another pizza.

CHAPTER 3



An hour later, my stomach was full and the pizza boxes empty. I pulled out my old laptop and booted it up.

Dez scowled at it. “That’s your computer?”

“What’s wrong with it?” I unbuttoned the top button on my jeans and leaned back on my futon. As a goat shifter, I may have a fast metabolism, but putting away that much pizza still gave me a food baby.

Dez shook his head and muttered something about dinosaurs, but he picked up my laptop and got to work. I studied him as he click-clacked away on the keyboard. This was a new, confident side of Dez I hadn’t seen before. I liked it.

He glanced over at me. “I subscribed you to a VPN and am installing a new browser that you’ll have to use to access the dark web.”

I had no clue what a VPN was. I gave him a thumbs up. “Great!”

A few minutes later, Dez flipped the computer around to show me. “What’s the website?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Dez shot me a sharp look. “What do you mean you don’t know? What are you trying to do on the dark web?” He probably should have led with that.

I told him about the online auction that I wanted to find but left out the bit about the exorbitant amount of money the

dagger would fetch and the fact that I was flirting with taking it. “Can’t you just Google it?”

Dez rubbed his temple as if he had a headache. “No. You can’t just Google it. That’s the whole point of the dark web.”

I checked my watch. The Sundowner was open for another hour or so, but the chances of the stranger who had told me about the dagger still being there were slim. Even if he was, I doubted Hopper would let me in the door to ask him for the website.

Dez let out an exaggerated sigh before grilling me for more details on the auction. I told him everything I knew.

“Fine. I’ll check with my online sources and see what I can come up with,” Dez grumbled.

I slapped him on the knee. “Look at you, all badass, with sources on the dark web.”

He gave me a flat look.

“What? I’m just saying, you’re at least ten times cooler than I thought you were.”

“Thanks a lot,” he muttered, continuing to type.

I looked over his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Working.” He angled the computer screen, so I couldn’t see it.

I laughed. “Alright. I can take a hint.” I reached for my earbuds and put on my favorite bad bitch playlist and sang along to Bishop Briggs’ “Champion.”

Four songs in, Dez tapped me to get my attention. “Got it!”

Sure enough, he had found the auction listing. Instead of the description I expected, there was a high-resolution close-up of the dagger. I frowned. Whoever listed this dagger was either new to trading in magical artifacts or just plain reckless.

Normally, sellers avoided posting photos online. Instead, interested parties could contact the auctioneer for photos to be sent directly to them. Splashing photos all over the web was a no-no for a couple reasons. Exposing supernaturals to the

general human population was forbidden. Granted, most humans would dismiss an object like this as being a fake. And maybe it was.

Based on the six-figure bids with two weeks to go before the auction closed though, I doubted it. I leaned in for a better look. I'd stolen a lot of supposed magical objects back in the day, and I had yet to find one that buzzed with any kind of real power. Regardless, they'd all still brought in a nice wad of cash back when Carl had sold them to collectors. I tried and failed to tamp down the bitterness that always rose when I thought of how much money Carl made on the artifacts he'd forced me to steal for him over the years. While he'd been the one who planned all our heists, I'd always been the one taking the risks.

Normally, sellers didn't list photos of magical artifacts online because it was a surefire way to draw the wrong kind of attention. It was an underground market for a reason. If the Enclave got wind of this auction, they'd shut it down. They'd confiscate the artifact and squirrel it away wherever they kept objects of power they deemed too dangerous for the general supernatural population to possess. Of course, the secretive Enclave, which served as the ultimate governing body for all supernaturals, had no qualms about stockpiling such power for themselves.

Not if I got to it first. My pulse sped up at the thought of going after the dagger on my own. Every heist I'd ever been on had been dictated by Carl. He'd found the targets, planned the operation, and fenced the goods. I was a damn good thief, and my ability to think on my feet had kept me alive more times than I could count. But he'd always been the one in charge. If I did this, I'd be the one calling the shots—no Carl in the background yanking my chain. I could do things my way, and the idea was intoxicating.

“Who's selling it?” I scanned the screen over Dez's shoulder.

He clicked around until he found a name—Ashford Auction House, Purveyor of Rare Collectibles and Antiquities. “No seller listed, but there's an auctioneer.” Dez dug his cell

phone out of his pocket and did a quick search. “The auction house looks legit, at least.” He handed me the phone. “And local.”

As far as I knew, the underground-market scene in Kansas City was virtually non-existent. Sure, plenty of local witches dabbled in forbidden magic, but they did most of their shopping for anything other than basic ingredients out of town.

I poked around on the website Dez had pulled up. Ashford Auction House may claim to trade in antiquities, but most of their upcoming sales looked like your standard run-of-the-mill rich people crap. There were plenty of overpriced antiques and art, but nothing else that hinted at magic—another indication whoever listed this dagger was an amateur. If someone had just stumbled over this artifact and listed it without understanding its value, using a normal auction company would make more sense. I felt a buzz of excitement at the possibility of only human security measures between me and a hefty payday.

The usual players who dealt in magical objects would never list a prize like this through a random auctioneer. They would’ve turned to one of three power brokers who dominated the North American magical underground market. The Canadian market, as well as most of the Midwest and the east coast, was the domain of Zara Bellarose. Zara was a witch who had been booted off the powerful Witches’ Council decades ago for dabbling in forbidden magic. These days, she was as powerful as she had been on the council and a whole lot richer.

Julius Kazan, the second player, was rumored to be one of the oldest vampires outside of Europe. He had a stranglehold on the west coast.

The third power player was the only one I’d had a run-in with. Like Kazan, Damien Creed was a vampire. He ran the markets from the southwest all the way down to Central America. He was also the last mark I ripped off before running from Santa Fe to Kansas City. As far as I knew, Creed had no idea I was the one who stole that chip of the Alatyrr stone from

under his nose all those years ago. I wasn't in a hurry to bump into him again to test that theory.

I pointed back at the dark web auction site that Dez was still scrolling through. "Did they list anything else?"

"No, just the dagger." Dez frowned. "It seems weird to have an auction for one thing."

Not weird if that one thing will go for big bucks. I circled back to the information I really needed. "Can you find the seller?"

"Maybe," Dez said, picking his phone back up to scroll through Ashford's webpage. His finger stilled, and his lips curled back, showing a hint of fang. "Son of a bitch."

I scrambled away from him when his eyes went red. In all the time I'd known Dez, I'd never seen him in the throes of bloodlust, but he was skating close to it now. "What is it?"

He pointed to a webpage detailing the auction site's security protocols. It was information designed to put rich sellers at ease when entrusting their valuables to a third party for the sale. I looked back to Dez. "I don't get it."

He tapped on the name at the bottom of the screen. *Secured by Marshall Reid.*

"So?"

Dez gritted his teeth. "So, that's my old company."

"The cyber security company you worked for before you were turned?"

He nodded.

"Okay. Seeing the name of the place you used to work has you mad—why exactly?"

Dez closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, his eyes had gone back to brown, but anger still vibrated through his body. "I didn't just work there," he admitted.

I stared at the company logo until it hit me. "Reid, as in Desmond Reid."

“Yeah. My company.” He ran his tongue across the fangs that had punched through his gums.

“What happened?” I asked.

I’d always assumed Dez had been just another low-level computer programmer working in a cube farm. He looked to be in his mid-twenties—my age. While the youthful glow was a well-known vampire perk, Dez had told me he was only turned last year. Owning a company like that so young was impressive.

Dez raked his fingers through his messy red hair and adjusted his glasses. “It’s a long story.” From the lengthy pause, it was also clearly one he wasn’t in the mood to revisit. He shifted the conversation back to the auction site. “To access the seller information, I’d have to break through their firewall and get into Ashford’s database.”

“You can do that?”

“I can do that.”

I didn’t have to ask if he would do it. The red eyes and flash of fang were answer enough.

CHAPTER 4



While Dez worked on getting me a seller name the next day, I went in search of a disguise. In order to poke around Ashford Auction house to see if they were housing the dagger on the premises—an admitted long shot with something so valuable—I needed to blend in. My go-to pink pigtails and combat boots weren't going to cut it.

Fortunately, I knew just the person to hit up for a high-quality wig, a change of eye color, and a classy wardrobe. My friend Kali owned a costume shop in West Bottoms, a Kansas City neighborhood overflowing with epic haunted houses and eclectic businesses, many of which were owned and operated by supernaturals. Although Kali had plenty of human clientele, she was a necromancer and a powerful one at that. She was also a talented makeup artist and costume designer. If anyone could turn me into the kind of woman who bid on overpriced trinkets, it would be Kali.

I decided to pop by her shop. It was a ten-minute bus ride from my apartment. When I arrived, the closed sign was still up. I headed around the side of the building and up the stairs to her apartment.

When there was no answer, I started to worry. Kali had been searching for a spell to banish the demon loose in Kansas City. Although she had the Tribunal for backup, I didn't put a lot of trust in the powers that be to look out for anything beyond their own self interests.

The Tribunal was the local supernatural governance for the Interior Territory, which included Kansas City. It was made up

of the most powerful members of each faction—vampires, necromancers, witches, and shifters. I'd only had run-ins with two local Tribunal members. The Tribunal's shifter representative was none other than Max Volkov, the man I tried to avoid at all costs. The witch and vampire representatives didn't reside in Kansas City.

Meira, who was the necromancer representative, did. She ran Old World Occult & Curiosities around the corner from Kali's costume shop. Because she stocked potion supplies, I'd made a few errand runs there to pick up essentials for friends. Meira was also in charge of Kali's training, whether Kali wanted her help or not.

I walked to Meira's shop, catching up with her as she unlocked the door. Her lips turned down at the sight of me, but she quickly recovered her normally bland expression. Meira and I couldn't be more different. She was understated elegance from the tips of her perfectly styled silver locks to her cream-colored linen pants and expensive nude heels. I was all about obnoxious t-shirts and bold color.

Meira scanned the street behind me. Seeing I was alone, she dropped her pleasant customer service face. "What do you want, child?"

Better than being called kid, I supposed. "Have you seen Kali?"

"She's at Volkov's."

That's just great. "Why is she there?"

"She's doing research," Meira said.

I'd been in Volkov's library and knew he had quite a book collection. It wasn't a stretch to imagine demon texts among them. I felt a pang of guilt at leaving the research to Kali, but I took more of a boots-on-the-ground approach to research. Still, I could at least lend moral support while she dug through Volkov's musty old books.

As if she read my mind, Meira paused on the threshold. "You should leave her to it. You'll just be in the way. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a business to run." She stepped

inside, closing the door firmly behind her and shooing me through glass.

It cost me a good chunk of my hard-earned tip money for a ride share. Unsurprisingly, Max Volkov didn't live anywhere near my run-down apartment. His house was in a rural subdivision that catered to executives and surgeons who could afford the privacy that came with nice little acreage and a sprawling house. I had the ride share driver drop me on the road in front of Volkov's place.

Although there was a gate at the end of his long driveway, it was propped wide open. Not that it would have kept anyone out. It was a freestanding gate anchored by columns without an actual fence to go with them. I shook my head. Rich people spent money on the dumbest shit.

I weighed my options. I could walk down the winding driveway and knock on his front door like a normal person. Or I could use this as an opportunity to test how rusty my skills were. *It'll be good practice*, I told myself, even if it did have the added benefit of avoiding Volkov a little longer. Between his insistence I join the pack and the self-destructive attraction I couldn't seem to extinguish, my instincts were in full fight-or-flight mode.

I knew better than most how dangerous it was to draw an alpha's attention. And yet, here I was, scanning the property for access points. Once I was confident there were no hidden surveillance or patrolling werewolves, I stepped into the trees bordering the driveway.

Volkov's house was a two-story set back about a quarter mile from the road, wooded on both sides. Despite its obnoxious size, the house's dark wood siding and lighter stonework blended in surprisingly well with the surrounding land. I paused in the trees, studying the expansive lawn ringing the house.

I clocked three security cameras—one at each corner of the house and one front-and-center above the front door. I smiled. There were enough blind spots, I could walk straight up to the

window of his library, use my handy dandy pocketknife to jimmy it open, and climb right through.

In the end, I didn't even need the knife since the window wasn't locked. *Arrogant wolf.*

Kali was so absorbed in the book she was reading, she didn't hear me open the window and climb inside. We needed to work on her situational awareness. She may be a powerful necromancer, but she was new to this world. It showed.

Even buried in musty old books, she looked like a calendar pinup in her curated outfit. Today, she had a gauzy red scarf wound around her long, dark hair. My stomach pitched at the thought of her facing a demon.

I made sure I hit the floor hard enough to draw her attention.

Kali's head snapped up, her pretty brown eyes widening when she spotted me. Then, she glanced nervously at the door as if expecting Volkov to barge in. "What are you doing?" she whisper yelled.

"Helping." I peered over her shoulder to see what had her so engrossed. Her book was open to a two-page illustration of a werewolf feasting on a village. "I don't think you're going to find your spell in there."

She closed the book and turned to face me. "How did you know where to find me?"

I cocked an eyebrow. "Meira."

Kali huffed as she slid the book back on the shelf. She walked to the still open window and leaned out. "How did you get past Volkov's security, anyway?"

"Please." I laughed until my eyes filled with tears. "I've seen better security in the suburbs." I joined her at the window, pointing to the security cameras. "Those are all for show. There are blind spots big enough for an amateur to sneak through." *I'm far from an amateur, even if I am a bit out of practice.*

Kali propped a hand on her hip and eyed me. “Amateur? As opposed to a professional what? Burglar? Is there something you’re not telling me?” Her tone was light, but I read the curiosity in her expression.

Today wasn’t the day to play show-and-tell though. “Not everyone had an idyllic childhood.” I smiled to soften the words.

She looked at me long enough I wasn’t sure she’d let it go. Finally, she turned back to her books. “Just don’t get us kicked out before we can locate the ritual.”

While Kali continued to sift through Volkov’s impressive book collection in search of a demon-banishing spell, I settled myself in Volkov’s oversized executive chair and spun in a circle. Although I’d been in the alpha’s house plenty of times, it usually involved being called to task for some B.S. or other. And he never left me unsupervised.

It would have been a shame to waste such a golden opportunity to snoop. I rifled through his desk drawers. The top drawer was standard desk fare. Even his paperclips were orderly. I hummed to myself as I made a mess of his office supplies, alternating the pens, so he was sure to get ink on his hands. I closed the top drawer and tried the others, stopping when I hit one that was locked. *Bingo.*

I pulled my rainy-day lock picking kit out of my jacket pocket and got to work. In a matter of seconds, the lock gave. I pulled the drawer open to see what a man like Volkov had to hide. There were three things inside—money, a pretty little velvet pouch, and a folded piece of paper. If I were the kind of the woman tempted by easy money, I would have pocketed the fat stack of cash in the middle of the drawer.

I bypassed Volkov’s emergency cash to reach for the more interesting blue velvet drawstring bag. It was light in my hand, ruling out heavy gemstones or rare coins. Before I investigated the contents, my attention snagged on the folded paper.

What kind of note would be valuable enough to lock in a drawer? The man didn’t bother locking the windows to his home, so whatever it was, it was important. The paper was too

small for a love letter and too white for an old memento. I flipped it open with a finger, my pulse racing when I saw what was written in black ink.

Even though there was no name to accompany the phone number, I recognized the area code. Santa Fe. I clutched the edge of the desk as the room closed in on me. *Just because it's a Santa Fe number doesn't mean it's connected to Carl*, I told myself. I knew Carl's number as well as my own, and this wasn't it. Or at least, it hadn't been his number eight years ago. But what were the chances Volkov had a contact in Santa Fe that warranted a locked drawer? Even if it wasn't connected to Carl, it could spell trouble for me.

It could be Damien Creed's number. Volkov was certainly rich enough to dabble in the magical underground market. Although he was on the Tribunal, he wouldn't be the first government official to play both sides of the law. Creed was as dangerous to me as Carl. If Creed had any inkling of what I'd done and where he could find me, I was a dead woman walking. I stared at the paper, committing the number to memory before closing the drawer. I looked up to Kali's curious eyes.

Don't panic. I swallowed, steeling my nerves. I held up the velvet bag as a distraction, forcing a smile as I spilled the contents into my hand. "Wonder what we have here." It was a delicate gold locket, and I was curious about who it belonged to. Was it a gift for a lover or a family heirloom? I didn't have a chance to open the locket to see whose face was inside because the library door opened with a thud.

Max Volkov stalked inside, his angry gaze immediately freezing me in place. That flare of amber kicked my heart rate up in a way it hadn't before I knew about the phone number tucked away in his desk.

"How did you get in here?" he demanded.

I searched Volkov's face for a sign he knew what I'd done to land me here in his territory eight years ago. But I couldn't see past his anger. I made myself stand my ground as he

crossed the room, clutching the delicate locket so tightly it imprinted in my palm.

If my experience with dominant wolves taught me anything, it was how to pull bravado around me like a shield. “Dude, you should really upgrade your security. A middle schooler could break in here.”

He ignored my jab and pivoted to Kali. “Did you find anything of interest, Ms. James?”

Kali held up a thin volume. “Maybe. I still need to locate the summoning spell, though.”

Part of me wanted to take the opening while his attention was on her—climb out that window and leave the way I came. But if I did that, I’d never know if Volkov planned to hand me over to the pack I’d escaped so long ago. I had to know. So, I dropped my weight to my back foot and put a slight bend in my knees, ready to defend myself if need be.

“I found something interesting.” I met his eye, curled my lip, and gave the locket a flick of my wrist to set it in motion. Then, I waited to see what he’d do when he realized I’d been in that drawer. He’d have to know I’d seen the number written on the paper.

Volkov clenched his jaw so hard, my teeth hurt just looking at him, but his eyes never darted to that locked drawer. There was no glimmer of awareness, no flicker of guilt. All of his attention was riveted on the delicate necklace still swinging from my fist.

He moved so fast, I didn’t sense the danger until he was looming in front me. “That drawer was locked.”

“It was.”

“Give me the necklace,” he snarled.

Even though I never broke eye contact, I was conscious of the anger coiling in his body and the stiffening of his muscles. I’d been here before, and my body knew what to do, bracing me for the impact long before he raised his hand.

I flinched.

Instead of the blow I'd been expecting, Volkov froze. His hand was wrapped around the locket, but his grip gentled. "I wasn't going to hit you," he said quietly.

He spoke to me like he would a frightened child, his eyes locked on the erratic pulse at my throat. I felt as vulnerable as a rabbit caught in a predator's gaze. Just like that, I was a scared sixteen-year-old kid again, trying to dodge the attention of an alpha who wielded his power like a weapon. I hated that version of me, and I resented Volkov for reminding me of her.

Something in me snapped. I welcomed the rush of anger that crowded out my fear and embarrassment. Volkov looked like he wanted to say something else, but I cut him off.

"Whatever," I said through clenched teeth. Letting go of the locket between us, I swept the papers from his desk to the floor and fled through the window.

CHAPTER 5



Despite working in a bar for the past few years, I wasn't much of a weeknight drinker. After my run-in with Volkov, I made an exception. Grinders was the kind of Midwestern mashup you normally found in a small town—coffee shop by day, dive bar after dark. Located in the heart of Kansas City, it was a West Bottoms' neighborhood staple.

At the moment, I was camped out in Grinder's storage room with Laurel, an off-the-clock barista I sometimes dueted with on karaoke nights. Laurel was a good girl with a wild side that only came out when she had a mic in her hands or a bottomless shot glass in front of her. The half-empty bottle of cheap rum on the floor between us meant we were both feeling reckless.

Laurel took another drink before squinting at her phone. "Ugh. My ride's here." She looked up with a wobbly smile. "You gonna be okay, doll? I can tell him to come back later."

I waved her off. I was crappy company, anyway.

Without Laurel to distract me, I had to face the train wreck that brought me here. When I'd run from my old pack at sixteen, it had been on the heels of pulling off my biggest heist to date. Carl, the alpha who took me in after my parents died in a house fire, spent years turning me into a world-class thief. That last heist, he sent me after an artifact he'd been chasing for years.

I stole a chip of Alatyrr stone from Damien Creed's house just like we'd planned. And then I hid it where Carl would

never find it before I skipped town, looking nothing like the girl he'd known. I'd stopped looking over my shoulder years ago. Until now.

That phone number looped through my head. Volkov was in contact with someone from Santa Fe. *Who? And why?* Before I realized what I was doing, I'd typed the number into my phone, my thumb hovering above the call button. I'd love to do it—put the what ifs to rest and find out whose number it was. But if it was Carl or Damien Creed on the other end, I couldn't risk caller ID.

Fuck my life. I slid my phone across the floor before I did something I couldn't take back.

I may not have committed to stealing the dagger yet, but I sure was inching closer to it as I sat there plotting the heist. That magical dagger was no longer a temptation; it was an insurance policy. If Volkov sold me out and Carl found me, I was going need a lot more money than my meager bartending tips to get out of Kansas City alive.

The thought of starting over, of giving up the life I'd built here, sent me straight back to the rum. By the time I finished the bottle, I was too tired to make my way home. I climbed on top of one of the freezers and let the hum lull me to sleep.

I woke up in Kali's bed with a splitting headache. I groaned, recalling Grinder's morning barista threatening to call the alpha when she spotted me sleeping on the freezer. I had vague memories of shifting into my goat and head-butting Max Volkov before Kali intervened. Everything after that was fuzzy.

I sat up slowly. Eventually, I made it to Kali's kitchen, downing two glasses of water before I noticed the note she'd left on the table telling me she'd gone to work. After a quick shower, I made good use of the toothbrush she'd set on the counter for me.

Judging from the bright light spilling through the windows when I was done, it was already mid-day. My phone buzzed. The text was from Dez. He had an address for the seller and was smart enough not to put it in the text. My pulse raced.

I arranged a meetup for six o'clock at my apartment. That would be plenty of time to get what I needed. I locked Kali's door behind me but paused on the landing. I took my phone back out and shot Dez another text to ask if he could trace a phone number for me. I'd checked online this morning, and the Santa Fe number was unlisted. When he sent back an eye roll emoji, I typed in the number and hit send. With any luck, I'd know how much danger I was facing before I went after the dagger.

I headed downstairs to the Costume Shoppe. Even with the extra-strength painkillers I'd downed, I swore at the obnoxious bell above the door. Kali looked up from where she was helping a customer and waved me over.

When the customer left, she beamed at me. "How you feeling, sunshine?"

I grabbed a pair of sunglasses from the accessory aisle and sighed as I slid them on my face. "Ugh. Why do people drink?"

Kali laughed. "I can give you a ride home in a bit."

"Nah. I should walk this off." I wandered over to the selection of wigs, which is why I sought her out yesterday before I got distracted by that phone number. I still needed a disguise. "Hey Kali, are these all the wigs you have?" The selection out here was limited to mass produced cheap wigs, none of which would ever pass for real hair.

"I keep the high-end ones in the back of the shop. Why?"

I studied her from behind the dark sunglasses. Kali and I had grown closer these past few months, and I would've loved to have someone to talk to. But she had big enough problems of her own. She had been tasked with chasing down the demon wreaking havoc in the city. I didn't like lying to Kali, but I didn't want to drag her into my mess. "It's for theme night at karaoke."

She groaned. The last time I convinced her to go to karaoke with me ended badly, which was why I used it as my

excuse. No way she'd chance another night like that while her embarrassment was still fresh.

"I'm not going," she insisted.

I laughed and then winced when the sound hurt my head. "I figured."

Kali motioned for me to follow her into the back of her shop where she kept all the good stuff. "What's your theme?"

"Blonde bombshell." I scanned the assortment of costumes and props. "Something elegant if you've got it."

She bent down and rummaged through some supplies before coming up with a perfect platinum blonde wig that looked like it was made of human hair. Instead of handing it over, Kali climbed on a stool, so she was taller than me. She put the wig on my head and tucked my bright pink strands beneath it. Satisfied, she handed me a small mirror. The result was exactly what I was going for.

"Perfect." I tilted my head and took in the profile view. I'd have to lose the nose piercing, but the transformation was stunning. "Do you have a pair of brown contacts by chance?"

"I do." Kali looked around until she found them. "Here you go."

I didn't try them on. I glanced down at my outfit and then back at her. "I'm probably going to regret this, but do you have anything classy I can borrow to wear?"

Her whole face lit up with delight. While I was comfortable in ratty jeans and combat boots, Kali was a vintage clothing fashionista. The only thing she loved more than piecing together her own outfits was dressing someone else. Normally, playing dress up was a hard no for me, but my normal clothes weren't going to cut it.

After following her to her closet, I watched her rummage around inside. I vetoed the pencil skirt and the pale peach sheath dress, both of which would be a liability if I needed to run. Twenty minutes later, we settled on a pair of flared black pants with a tie waist and a royal blue silk shirt I would never in a million years choose for myself.

Of course, that was the whole point.

CHAPTER 6



With three hours to kill, I took a bus to downtown Kansas City. Because my black leather jacket and scuffed boots were a much better fit with the early afternoon public transit crowd, I waited until I arrived for my makeover. Fortunately, there was a sandwich shop with a roomy bathroom stall and decent lighting around the corner from the auction house.

Ashford Auction House, Purveyor of Rare Collectibles and Antiquities was housed in an old brownstone that screamed “old money welcome here.” I paused two businesses down to freshen up my barely-there nude lipstick and to practice my disinterested face. *Show time*. I swept into the foyer with my shoulders back and my lips turned down.

“May I help you?” The man who greeted me was mid-forties and well-groomed with an expensive watch and designer shoes. Definitely human.

“Perhaps.” I surveyed the room before answering him, noting the discreet security cameras monitoring the glass display cases in the next room. Soft lights illuminated the art hanging on the walls like it was a museum. Antique chairs and side tables were arranged throughout the room. Nothing so tacky as a price tag was in sight. If I hadn’t read the gold-lettered sign hanging above the door, I’d think I wandered into someone’s mansion rather than a place of business.

Other than the man who greeted me, the only other people here were two men who were moving an antique wardrobe from the back room into a truck parked outside the propped-

open back door. Both of the movers appeared human as well. Although witches and necromancers weren't easily identifiable, most witches and all necromancers were women. That left shifters and vampires. I may not have the nose of a wolf, but even my shifter senses could distinguish between the other supernatural factions—shifters and vampires—and humans.

Why would anyone use a human auction house to sell a rare magical artifact?

The man stood patiently, not a hint of annoyance cracking his polite exterior as he waited for my attention. I looked at a point just over his shoulder as I addressed him. "I'm something of a collector." As I scanned the room again, I let my disappointment show. "I had hoped to find something less ordinary given the antiquities mentioned in your name. But I can see there is nothing of interest here." I turned on my heel and took a step toward the door.

"Ma'am," he stopped me. "We do have a few pieces that just came in. They're scheduled for auction but are too rare and valuable to keep in the showroom."

"Ah, wonderful." I waited expectantly. "May I see them?"

"Right this way." He led me down a hallway into a plush office, complete with leather-backed chairs and artfully arranged bookshelves. He left the door open.

Seeing my frown, the man hustled toward the mahogany desk and flipped the computer monitor around. "We don't keep objects of that value on site, of course. But I'm happy to show you our listings." His voice lilted up at the end, no doubt in hopes of a fat commission were I to drive up the price on one of those listings.

"Hmmm," I murmured noncommittally.

He pulled up several photos of antique jewelry and rare books, extolling their virtues as he clicked through them.

"I'm looking for a gift for my fiancé. Do you have anything more masculine?" I met his eyes. "A weapon perhaps."

“I have just the thing,” he said. I expected to see the dagger, but instead he pulled up a photograph of a pair of gleaming flintlock pistols.

“What about swords?” I asked. “Or daggers? I think he’d prefer something with a blade.”

He swallowed, gaze darting to the open door. “There is one, but it’s garnering a lot of interest.”

After seeing the auction house in person, I wondered exactly what kind of interest it was attracting. *Were rich humans bidding on the dagger without a clue what it was worth?* “Oh?”

“Oh yes. This particular dagger has even drawn a few international bids.”

I arched a brow and waited until he pulled up the dagger I came for. “Lovely,” I said, not flinching at the exorbitant current bid. For that kind of money, I wasn’t the only one who knew what I was looking at. “I would need to see the dagger in person, of course.”

The man chuckled. “You’re the second person who has made that request.”

My palms grew clammy at the thought of someone else getting to this dagger before I could. I willed myself to relax. It was more likely to be an average buyer or even a middle-aged dude who likes RPG than it was to be someone like me. I couldn’t help scanning the front of the auction house to ensure no one else was here though.

Seeing where my gaze was, the man smiled. “Unless that was your fiancé calling to inquire?”

Some of the tension left my shoulders. *It was just a phone call.* “No. I guarantee my fiancé has no idea I’m here.”

“Of course. Unfortunately, viewing it in person is not possible. It remains in the seller’s possession until the close of the auction.” When he saw my disappointment, he rushed on. “I can assure you that the winning bidder will be able to fully inspect the dagger before the sale is final. The buyer, of course, is welcome to bring his or her own appraiser as well.”

The only people qualified to appraise an item like this were the ones running the North American underground-market auctions. No chance in hell I was asking one of them. “It’s probably too rich for my blood.” I turned to leave, resisting the urge to itch the back of my neck where the wig brushed against my skin.

A block away, I stuffed the wig in my bag, not wasting the time it would take to change clothes. While I waited at the bus stop, I took the brown contacts out and rubbed my eyes. If the lack of attention I drew was any indication, I was far from the weirdest thing my fellow transit riders had seen that day.

Although the trip to Ashford’s was a bust as I expected it would be, it was still good to check it off the list. Plus, it had given me something to do other than worry while I waited for six o’clock. I even had enough time to grab a dozen tacos from my favorite food truck before heading to my apartment to meet Dez. Since I doubted Kali would appreciate taco sauce on her pristine silk shirt, I waited until I was home to dive into my takeout.

I’d polished off eight tacos by the time my doorbell rang.

Dez didn’t waste time on small talk. “I’ve got the name of your seller and the owner of that phone number. Which do you want first?” He kicked his shoes off by the door before snagging one of the remaining tacos for himself.

“The phone number.” I braced myself.

Dez grabbed a napkin to wipe his mouth before answering. “It belongs to a P.I. named Raul Garcia in Santa Fe, New Mexico.”

“A private investigator?”

“Yup,” he said around a mouthful of beef taco.

While I was relieved that it wasn’t a direct line to one of the men who had incentive to kill me, I didn’t have a clue why Max Volkov would contact a P.I. in New Mexico. *What are the chances it’s a coincidence that won’t somehow come back to bite me?*

“And the seller?” I asked.

Dez walked to the kitchen to fill a glass of water. When he returned, he leveled an assessing look at me.

“Well?” I prompted.

I knew I wasn't going to like what came out of his mouth when he dropped his shoulders and puffed up his chest. “I want in.”

I crossed my arms and glared at him “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I want in on the job.” Dez's eyes shifted to vampire red, but the tremble in his hands gave away his nervousness.

“What job?”

Dez tsked and plopped himself in the middle of my futon. “You want me to believe you're window shopping?” He glanced around at my threadbare apartment furniture. “Because you obviously don't have the kind of money it would take to actually bid on that dagger.”

I didn't answer, hoping he was bluffing.

Dez kicked his feet up on my coffee table like he had one over on me. I narrowed my eyes, and he hastily dropped his feet back to the floor. “Look,” he said. “I don't care that you're going to steal it.” He held up a hand to hold off any objections. “Really. Don't care. But my old company is providing more than just website security, and I want the chance to screw them over. A security breach of that magnitude would ruin them.” He leaned forward. “I want in.”

I considered it. Although I could bypass most security cameras, I had my limitations. Having a cyber security guru in my corner wasn't a half bad idea. Plus, if Dez was in on the job, that would be incentive for him to keep his mouth shut. “Ten percent.”

“Twenty,” he haggled.

“Five,” I countered.

He laughed and held out his hand. “Ten.”

Even though I would probably regret this, I shook on it. “So?” I prompted “Who’s the seller?”

Dez reached into his computer bag and pulled out a shiny new laptop rather than use mine. “The seller is listed as a museum.”

“A what?” *Why would a museum be selling a magical dagger on a dark web auction site?* “A museum makes zero sense, unless it’s a front.”

He nodded. “That’s what I thought, so I did a little digging. And that’s where it gets weird.”

My eyebrows rose. *It was already weird.* “How so?”

Dez patted the seat next to him, and I dropped into it. He pointed to his screen. “It’s a one-room private museum in the middle of nowhere.” He pointed to a tiny speck of a town that was about an hour drive from Kansas City.

“Does it have a website?” I asked hopefully.

“Nope.” Dez shut his computer and got up. “I guess we’re going on a field trip,” he said cheerfully, stealing my last taco.

“We?” I shook my head. “No way. I’ll check it out.” The last thing I needed was carrot top here tagging along for the ride. Between his hair color and his nervous tics, Dez wasn’t exactly incognito.

Dez smirked, cradling my last taco in his hand. “How are you going to get there? You don’t drive.”

He had me there.

CHAPTER 7



Stull, Kansas was little more than a ghost town, with a handful of scattered buildings, including the museum. The good news was that we wouldn't have a big audience for our surveillance. The bad news was that in a town this size, someone had likely already clocked our presence—especially in Dez's tinker toy of a car. He'd insisted the micro car got excellent gas mileage. Unfortunately, we were in big truck country. Dez's glorified go-cart didn't exactly blend in with the locals.

I glanced at him. Dez was slouched in his seat, a brand-new baseball cap pulled low over his eyes despite the fact that it was already dusk. Unlike the Hollywood version, real vampires didn't poof when exposed to sunlight. They were perfectly capable of going outside during daylight hours. The demons residing within their human bodies were sensitive to light though, making most vamps prefer the night shift. That was why we were here now instead of mid-day when we could've visited the museum like tourists. Although now that I saw the dilapidated building for myself, I doubted it hosted many tourists.

My phone dinged with a text. Dez glanced over but didn't comment. I bit my lip as I read Kali's message. She wanted to know if I'd tag along tonight to meet with the girls.

I'd introduced Kali to Helen, Bea, Alyce, and Janis—the witches who took me in when I'd landed in Kansas City as a runaway teenager. Those four women were the closest thing to family I had. They were also magical heavyweights who were

going to help Kali find a grimoire that might have a demon-banishing spell in it.

I tapped out a vague excuse that I had to work tonight and hit send. I tried to convince myself that Kali was well protected. Not only would she have Helen and the girls, she was also bringing along the Tribunal's enforcer for backup, and Craig Ward was a force on his own. Besides, I was useless when it came to rituals and spells. Helen and company were much more likely to be able to help her.

I got a text back right away, saying it was no problem. The truth was Kali was quickly becoming a powerhouse in her own right. *She's got this*. I still felt like a crap friend.

Brushing aside my guilt, I focused on the job at hand. I pulled down the passenger-side mirror to make sure all my hair remained tucked in my knit hat. I hadn't bothered with a full ski mask. I had popped in the brown contacts earlier, which I was now regretting. I dug out the eye lubricating drops again and put some in.

"Circle back to that big brick building on the corner and slow down. I'll jump out. Then, go for a nice drive in the country while I scope out the target." I checked my watch. "Pick me back up in the same spot in an hour."

"An hour?" Dez jerked his head to look at me before turning back to the road. "The deal was for me to go with you."

I patted the dash. "That's before I saw your car." When he looked like he was going to object, I cut him off. "Keep your phone on. I'll text for tech support if I need it."

Reluctantly, Dez nodded.

I pulled on my gloves and reached for the door handle. As soon as we were parked behind the old building, I hopped out of the car. "An hour, Dez."

From behind the brick building, I was able to navigate through the backyards separating me from my target. I stopped next to a large metal building next door and waited.

The next thirty minutes were my least favorite part of a heist, but they were necessary. Back flat against the cold metal, I waited. It was mind-numbingly boring, but I needed to wait for the full cover of darkness to move any closer to the target. I also wanted enough of a buffer that if someone did spot me, they didn't connect me with Dez's car. Patience was part of the game, but I sucked at killing time. Because I had nothing but the faint buzz of the streetlight to focus on, I let myself dredge up memories I'd long since buried.

The first time I did a job like this, I'd been fourteen years old. Carl—being the asshole he was—had sent me in blind. He loved to test my skills like that, said adrenaline was what would keep me alive. Maybe that's why I still craved the thrill of a good heist despite my best intentions and years away from the life. He'd baked it right into my formative years.

That first job should have been an easy in-and-out. Carl sent me after a handful of ancient rune stones the local coven had in its possession. Word on the street was that they were infused with powerful magic. The witches were supposed to all be out that night. At least, that's what Carl told me.

In reality, the nastiest of the bunch was on guard duty. She'd had the eyes of a hawk and the disposition of a nun with a ruler. She'd cast a cloaking spell, so I didn't spot her until I had the rune stones in my hand. I made it out alive—barely, no thanks to Carl.

I rubbed the scar on my forearm where the witch had sliced me open with a razor-sharp ring she wore on her index finger. That was the first and last time I skipped the reconnaissance phase and went straight for the steal. No matter how dead this town seemed or how easy a target the museum appeared to be, I knew better than to go for the dagger tonight.

Once dark blanketed the town, I edged around the building to the side shielded from the flickering streetlight. From there, I leap-frogged shadow to shadow until I was on the property line of my target. The closer I got, the more absurd it seemed that this could be the location where a rare and exorbitantly expensive magical dagger was housed.

The museum was little more than a run-down house with peeling white paint and a cardboard sign in the window proclaiming it to be open by appointment only. There wasn't a phone number on the sign though, so I wasn't sure how someone would manage to score such an appointment. *Definitely a front.* My shoulders slumped as I realized the likelihood of the dagger being kept here wasn't looking good.

I worked my way around the back of the house where overgrown boxwoods provided ideal cover. The back window was grimy as if years of dust had settled on its panes. It was clear enough to give me a look inside though—not that I could see much in the dark. After a quick glance around to make sure there weren't any busybodies peeking through their curtains at me, I turned on my flashlight app.

You've got to be kidding me. Smack dab in the center of the room was an old locking display case with a single item in it. Even with crappy light, I could see it was the same dagger listed on the auction site. I smiled. My life had just gotten a lot easier.

I shut off my light. My fingers itched to make an exception to my surveillance-first rule. I trailed a gloved finger along the sash of the window. It was tempting to slip inside and take it. My heart rate slowed, and my focus tunneled to the prize inside. I'd just slipped my left hand into my back pocket for my putty knife when headlights shone through the house. I ducked, and my good sense came back.

Don't be stupid, Riley. You know better than to rush a job like this.

I cracked my neck. Then, I crouch-walked to the side of the house to get a better look at who was crashing my party. Dez. *Of course, it was.* Not only had he parked in front of the museum in his very distinctive car, he hadn't even had the sense to shut off his headlights. He flashed the high beams like morse code, and I swore under my breath.

I backtracked out of the yard, pausing next to a cluster of trees long enough to throw a rock at Dez's window. His head snapped my direction. I pointed to his lights before slicing my

hand across my throat. Thankfully, he got the hint the first time and cut the lights. Then, I ran for the building where Dez had dropped me off earlier.

As soon as the car rolled to a stop, Dez leaned across the seat and opened the passenger side door. “Get in.”

I climbed in, still coming down off the high of having the dagger within my grasp. “Five percent.”

“What?” he snapped. He didn’t wait for me to close the door before driving off, and he didn’t bother turning the headlights back on.

“Your cut should be docked five percent for that stunt.” I pulled my gloves off. “What were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t thinking,” he admitted. His eyes were red when he turned to look at me, and I scooted closer to the door. “I was too busy saving your ass.”

He drove past the nearby cemetery and pulled off the road and parked next to a pasture gate. “Come on.” He eased out of the car, closing his door with a quiet snick.

“Where?” I whispered.

“Follow me and find out.” Dez trekked through a cluster of trees and climbed the fence of the cemetery. He waited for me to join him before weaving through the headstones. He didn’t stop until we were in the front row, crouching behind a huge headstone that looked like it had been here longer than the cemetery.

“What are we doing?”

He pointed across the road to the museum. “Watch.”

For several minutes, I didn’t see anything. Just as I started to fidget, I spotted the movement. A big body separated from the tree in the side yard and walked toward the museum. Whoever it was didn’t peep inside the windows like I had. The man moved like a soldier. He walked right up the stairs, unlocked the door, and went inside like he owned the place.

Dez glanced at me. “Fifteen percent.”

“Fifteen percent,” I agreed.

We made it back to his car without incident. Neither of us spoke until we were back on the highway.

Dez threw his baseball cap in the backseat. “That was too close.” He looked over at me and did a double take. “Why are you smiling?”

I pulled my seatbelt across my lap and buckled it. “Because this job just got a lot more interesting.”

That dagger might be in a run-down, small-town museum, but whoever was selling it had the good sense to hire security. That meant I’d have to work for it. Half the thrill of stealing something was the danger of getting caught. The other half was the fat payday that followed.

CHAPTER 8



When Dez said he knew a guy, I hadn't expected it to be a florist. But the van he borrowed had ample space and easy in-and-out dual back doors.

Dez scratched his chin and peered inside. "What do we need a van for, anyway?"

We'd already removed the shelves, so the back was wide open. We'd also covered the floor with a heavy-duty painter's canvas and secured the edges with bricks.

"We need the van to haul our distraction." I nudged Dez out of the way and slammed the doors shut before giving him the once over.

He was dressed in his normal geek casual, but at least he'd worn a long-sleeved shirt like I'd instructed. He'd also thrown on a pair of clip-on sunglasses to protect his sensitive eyes for our little afternoon excursion. They looked ridiculous, particularly since his vampire-corrected vision was sharp enough to ditch his regular glasses. I resisted the urge to tease him since I owed him for more than getting this van.

I wasn't sure how sensitive vamps were to temperature changes. Spring in this part of the country meant it could be sweltering hot or frigid, depending on the day or even the hour. Today was on the cold side for April. The long-sleeves I'd insisted he wear would keep Dez warm without a jacket. Plus, he'd appreciate the added protection if my co-conspirators didn't take to him right away.

I climbed in the passenger side, pulling up the location I'd saved earlier on my phone.

Dez got in the driver's side and started the van. He turned to me. "Where to?"

My stomach growled. "The closest drive-thru."

"You didn't eat breakfast?"

I stared at him. "Of course, I ate breakfast." I checked my watch. "But that was like two hours ago. I'm hungry."

"Fine. I'll find a drive-thru but show me where we're going." Dez held out his hand for my phone, and I gave it to him. "This is pretty rural." He furrowed his brow and tapped the location. "We're not hitting up some survivalist for explosives, are we? I need to return this van in one piece."

"No explosives." Although I liked to blow shit up as much as the next girl, this job required a more subtle approach.

He put my phone on the dash and pulled out. "Then what?" Dez persisted.

I knew he'd freak out as soon as he heard my plan, so I left out the specifics. We didn't have time for an argument. "Whoever it is that's selling the dagger obviously is expecting a hit. The guy watching the museum saw me poking around, which means getting close a second time isn't going to be easy."

"You think that guy was the seller?" he asked.

I considered it. "Nah. Whoever that was moved like a soldier. I'm guessing he's the hired muscle." What I couldn't be sure of was whether the hired muscle was human or supernatural. If he was human, Dez could compel him. But if the guy turned out to be a vampire, the attempt could get Dez killed. That wasn't something I was willing to risk.

Dez tapped the steering wheel. "If the seller was smart enough to hire security, why not move the dagger somewhere safer? Or at least put up some kind of security camera?"

"That is a very good question." If the clock wasn't ticking down on the auction, I'd invest a few days in surveillance to

figure it out. But time wasn't something I had to spare. "How hard was it for you to find the seller's address?" I asked him.

Dez met my gaze. "For me? Cake walk. For someone else, much harder."

"In that case, keeping it in a run-down museum in a ghost town seems like a decent strategy." The fact that it was front-and-center in the display case made less sense.

"Maybe," Dez conceded.

He stopped long enough to order a breakfast sandwich, hash browns, and an orange juice with a straw for me and a coffee for himself. Thankfully, he concentrated on driving rather than peppering me with more questions as I ate.

After I returned home last night, I'd spent hours weighing my options. Hitting the auction house during the appraisal was one option. It was something Carl would have insisted on doing. While the dagger wouldn't be locked down under a security system during a handover, it was a slim window. It was also the time when it would undoubtedly be surrounded by security guards. Even an amateur like this seller apparently was had to be smart enough to hire a security team to transport it to the auction house. Unlike Carl, I wasn't willing to risk the collateral damage guards would bring.

We still had a few days before the close of the auction. Going in hot would be the least expected move, which made it my best choice. It would also afford me a second chance if tonight's plan didn't work. *If you don't get yourself shot.* There was that.

Walking away from this job was the only option I couldn't afford to consider—not since finding a Santa Fe number tucked in Volkov's drawer like a loaded gun. Just because it belonged to a P.I. didn't mean I was in the clear. Far from it.

I didn't want to abandon my friends and life here, but staying alive may depend on it. Fencing that dagger would bring enough money for me to start over if need be. For the duration of the drive, I focused on the greening fields and endless blue Kansas sky.

Dez stopped the van at the goat crossing sign and turned to face me. “You’ve got to be shitting me.”

I grinned and punched him in the arm. “Relax. This is going to be so much fun!”

He muttered under his breath but stepped on the gas again.

A middle-aged woman in overalls and muck boots waited for us by the pens. Dez stayed in the van.

The woman lifted a hand to shade her eyes as I climbed out. “You must be Brandy.” She used the name I’d given her on the phone when I’d arranged this.

“That’s me.” My eyes were immediately drawn to the play yard. Dozens of goats frolicked in the penned area, climbing on old tires and jumping off a multi-tiered goat jungle gym. I laughed watching them, my heart lightening a little. “Are these my new friends?”

“They are.” She joined me at the fence. “You said you’re hosting a goat yoga retreat, right?”

“Yup.” *Not even close.* One of the goats started hopping sideways, his head bobbing as he went. Another chewed on a piece of grass and watched us with interest. “They’re perfect.”

She eyed the van dubiously. “Are you sure you want them in your van?”

“I do. It’s my mom’s van,” I said when I saw her looking at the florist logo in confusion.

“And she doesn’t mind you hauling a dozen goats in it?”

“No. It’s for a good cause,” I assured her.

After signing a contract and ponying up the security deposit, I listened to her Goats 101 lecture. Then, I had Dez back the van up to the gate and led twelve of them inside, climbing over the center console when I got to the front. The runt of the litter jumped in before the woman shut the door, giving us a bonus goat. I rolled down my window and offered to pay for the hitchhiker, but she waved it off.

Dez waited until the farm was in the rearview mirror before turning on me. “What’s the plan?” He raised his voice, so I could hear him over the bleating. The little white goat that had hitched a ride wriggled his way to the front of the van. He stopped to nibble on the sleeve of Dez’s shirt.

“Aww, he likes you.”

“Stop that.” Dez shooed him away, but the goat came right back to tug at the fabric with his mouth. Dez swerved as he played tug-of-war with the little guy. “Riley!”

I twisted in my seat, so I could rub the goat’s chest until I had his attention. I let my eyes narrow to slits and stared at him until he butted my hand for more pets. The bleating increased as the other goats jockeyed for position, jealous of the attention I was giving the little guy. I unbuckled my seat belt, so I could perch sideways on the center console. Dez was an okay driver, but I was pretty sure a goat in his lap would fast track us into the ditch.

“Damn it, Riley. That one is eating the door handle.” Dez snapped his fingers in the air, which the goats ignored. “I have to return this van, you know.”

I looked in the back. Sure enough, the biggest of the bunch was gnawing on the door handle as if it were beef jerky. Dez hit the brakes like he was about to pull over.

“Keep driving,” I told him. “I’ll take care of it.” I rummaged around until I found the fast-food bag. Tearing a couple strips from the bag, I popped one in my mouth and molded it into a ball. I grabbed the straw out of my empty orange juice bottle and turned in my seat. The first shot hit an ear. It was enough to get the goat’s attention. My second shot nailed him between the eyes and stuck.

“Did you just shoot spit wads at that goat?” Dez sounded like he was going to hurl.

I had no clue how this man survived adolescence. “It’s not like I could climb back there and play referee. Besides, it worked.”

The offender had stopped chewing on the door handle, too busy fending off the goats around him who wanted a closer look at the spit wad stuck to his head.

I turned the conversation back to the reason for our little field trip. “Because of last night, the seller—or at least his security detail—knows I’ve been snooping around. I won’t be able to walk right up to the museum like I did yesterday. At least, not in human form.”

Dez’s mouth dropped open. “Let me get this straight,” he started. “Your grand plan is to shift into a goat, break into the museum, and steal a dagger with what? Your mouth? How are you even going to get inside?”

“I’ll shift back to human once I’m next to the museum.” I reached back to scratch one of the goats under her arm. “All I need is a ticket to the door.”

Dez was quiet for a while.

I looked out the windshield to gauge where we were and caught him staring at me. “What? It’s a good plan.”

“Only you would think that’s a good plan.” He adjusted the mirror to better see the chaos in the back. “You don’t think a bunch of goats wandering around Stull is going to draw attention?”

“Oh, I’m banking on it.”

CHAPTER 9



Dez parked in the gravel lot next to the old brick building he'd dropped me at the night before. The building was big enough to shield the van from view of the museum as well as the smattering of houses in Stull. Yet it was close enough that herding the goats where I wanted them to go would be easy.

I kicked off my boots and pulled off my blue jeans while Dez pointedly looked out his window. *Of course, he'd be uncomfortable with nudity.* Vampires were an uptight lot by nature, but Dez took that to a whole new level.

I shrugged out of my leather jacket. "Here's the plan. Once I shift, I want you to open the back doors and let these guys out." I jerked a thumb toward the back, but Dez was too busy looking anywhere but at me to notice. "They'll serve as the primary distraction and get me close enough to the building that I can shift back and sneak in undetected. You can provide a second wave distraction if needed."

He snapped his head my direction. "You'll be naked."

I battled the urge to roll my eyes. "Trust me. This job is a quick snatch and grab. Once I'm in, it'll be five minutes tops, and I'll be back out again. It'll be fine." I pulled my t-shirt over my head and paused before unhooking my bra. "After you let the goats out, give us ten minutes to make a ruckus. By then, I'll be in position to get inside. Then, drive by. If anyone is outside the museum, I want you to pull into the driveway. Say you're making a delivery and ask for directions. Then if they're human, compel them to stay out of the museum."

Dez didn't turn to face me, but he scowled. "Directions to where?"

"Don't care." I tossed my phone in his lap. "Pick an address nearby. Just stall as long as you can by asking a lot of questions about how to get there."

"What if the security guard suspects I'm there to rob him?"

Dez was dressed in his usual tan dockers and button-down shirt. His outfit, paired with his boy-next-door earnest face and nerdy glasses meant no one in their right mind would mistake him for a robber. "If you sense any aggression from the guy, put that vampire speed to good use and get out of there."

"And leave you? No way."

I appreciated the loyalty. "You can always circle back here to pick us up." I opened the door and stepped out, the gravel digging into my bare feet. Stuffing my clothes under the seat, I grabbed the putty knife and lock-picking kit from my jacket pocket and tossed them to Dez along with a roll of duct tape. "After I shift, tape these to my stomach."

Dez arched an eyebrow but nodded. I shut the door to prevent the goats from escaping before I was ready for them, then shifted. When I'd selected the goats, I included several brown ones so that my sable coat wouldn't be distinctive within the herd. Although my goat form was larger than our borrowed goats, I wasn't so big that I'd stand out as long as we weren't all clumped together. And with goats, that wouldn't be an issue.

I met Dez at the back of the van and waited patiently while he secured the putty knife and kit. He used enough tape that it was going to hurt like hell to rip it off, but it wasn't like I could give him instructions. Dez took a deep breath before opening the double doors.

The goats didn't come out of the van single file. A mass of squirming, bleating bodies joined me on the gravel. I waited for the most dominate female to make her way to me and lowered my horns. Dez jumped out of the way as she collided with me. It didn't take long for me to get the upper hand.

Once my place in the herd was firmly established, they trusted me to lead them to good foraging spots. And the museum lawn was full of bushes, fat trees, and overgrown flower beds. As I'd hoped, the goats rapidly spread out. Most of them were happy to nibble on everything in sight. After being cooped up in a van for an hour, the more high-strung of the bunch left in search of entertainment.

I left them to it, heading for the back of the museum. As I neared the porch, the front door slammed open. From the looks of the man who came through that door, I would put money on him being the security from last night. He had a lean, muscular build and sharp eyes that quickly scanned the yard to assess the threat. *Definitely a soldier.*

Given the silver sprinkled in his hair and beard, I'd put him in his forties. *That sucks.* He was old enough not to make stupid mistakes but still young enough to hold his own in a fight.

At the moment, the man stood staring incredulously at the herd of goats decimating his shrubbery. "Hey!" he yelled, spotting a billy goat climbing on top of what I presumed was his car. "Get off there." The man waved his arms above his head.

The goat made eye contact before jumping twice and running down the windshield to bounce on the hood. That was enough to spur the man into motion. He ran toward the car.

I used the opening to slip around the house and duck into the same bushes I'd hidden in the night before. My shift only took a couple minutes. When I was back on two legs, I yanked the tape off my stomach, taking all the fine hairs with it. I gritted my teeth and breathed through the sting.

The putty knife made quick work of the window. I hoisted myself onto the open sill and climbed through. The room I landed in must have been the living room before the house had been turned into a museum. I quickly glanced around.

It was the most eclectic museum I'd ever stepped foot in. While the display case was dedicated to the dagger, the rest of the room was a hodgepodge of military paraphernalia and old

books. An army green cot was shoved in one corner of the room with a folded blanket on the end. Next to it, an acoustic guitar leaned against the wall. That wasn't the weirdest thing in the room.

The glass display case I spotted last night still held the dagger, but in the daylight, I could see the pentagram chalked onto the wood floor. I bent down to study it. Salt ringed the edges of the circle. *What the hell?*

The last time I'd seen a circle like this had been when Kali and I had accidentally summoned the demon now loose in Kansas City. Had I known how powerful Kali was, I would have never lit those damn candles. *Could this be connected somehow?* There were no sigils here though, just a run-of-the-mill pentagram. And a salt circle.

I wondered if it was cast as some kind of warding to keep the dagger safe. None of the witches I knew used circles to ward though. A circle was completely unnecessary since wards could be set anywhere and were invisible unless you had the magic needed to expose them. *Is this all for show?* Maybe I really was dealing with an amateur dabbling in magic.

I stepped to the right to give me a view down the hall and out the front door. Dez's van was parked in the driveway. The man who'd stormed out earlier stood next to it with his back to me. He hadn't looked like the type to play at witchcraft, but what did I know?

I stepped over the salt and into the circle. There was nothing high tech about the security in here. Just a simple lock on the kind of glass display case you'd find stuffed full of old coins at a flea market. Picking the lock was child's play. I reached inside for the dagger, half-expecting a trigger point alarm to go off as I lifted it out of the case.

Nothing happened.

This dagger was no dainty thing. The weight felt good in my hand. With a six-inch blade and a decorated hilt, it was a weapon that could inflict real damage. It was also beautiful. A pentagram to match the floor decorated the pommel. The cross

guard above the grip was tipped with two crescent moons and centered with a stone that appeared translucent except for the flames dancing at its center.

Those flames weren't illusion; they flickered inside the stone like live fire. When I drew a finger across the surface, the stone heated beneath my touch. The longer I stared at the flames, the harder it was to force my gaze away.

I was so absorbed that I didn't hear the man until he opened the backdoor and stepped inside. He stopped abruptly when he saw me.

"Hi," I said, suddenly remembering I was buck naked. The display case was between us, but at five-foot-eight, there was plenty of me visible above it. *Maybe it's good his attention is focused on something other than my face.* Of course, with my pink hair, I was plenty identifiable even if he was currently staring at my boobs.

I latched on to the first excuse that popped into my head for why I was standing here naked clutching a stolen dagger. "I smelled smoke." I grimaced. Not my best improv, but now I had to run with it. "I thought there was a fire," I clarified like that made it a better lie.

Up close, the man seemed less soldier, more serial killer. It was the scruffy beard and the tattoo of a skeleton in a jaunty little hat with an arrow through its head. The various knives strapped to the man's body added to the image. Security guards normally carried handguns, not slice-and-dice weapons. He stared at me without comment.

Naturally, I dug myself in deeper. "I was just getting in the shower and saw flames." I gestured vaguely over my shoulder as if I lived nearby. *Like people wouldn't notice a pink-haired woman in a town the size of a postage stamp.* "I ran right over to warn you, but no one was here. This looked valuable, so I saved it." I waved the dagger around. "You're welcome."

The man's eyes narrowed. He wasn't looking at my boobs anymore. *Shit.*

I started to back away, but he pulled a nasty looking knife from his thigh and balanced it like he knew how to throw it. He kept me in his sights as he reached in his pocket with his other hand and brought out a small metal vial.

I set the dagger on top of the display case and backed away. "I'll just go."

"Not so fast, demon bitch." His voice was raspy like he didn't use it often.

Demon bitch? "Rude."

He quickly bent down and poured salt out of the little vial onto a bare spot in the circle. *I guess that explains the circle.* This dude thought I was an actual demon he'd trapped.

I laughed. "You got this all wrong. I'm not a demon." I moved to the side, so I could show him that I was able to step right through his little trap.

"Don't move." He aimed his knife at my chest. As I shifter, I was strong enough to tangle with him, but a knife to the chest could potentially kill me if it struck my heart. I held my hands up in front of me. When I didn't bolt for the door, he took a few steps back, reaching for a canteen hanging from a hook near the hall. His attention and knife stayed fixed on me.

I held up my hands and stood where I was. "If you let me step over that circle, I can show you that I'm as human as you are." It was an educated guess. The man didn't smell like a shifter, and he hadn't attempted to compel me like a vamp would have. "Who are you?" I tried again. "And how do you know about demons, anyway?"

The man's face blanked. He didn't lower his knife, even as he unscrewed the lid of the canteen with his teeth.

"I didn't come alone, you know. I have backup." It was technically true even if my only backup was better equipped to take down a firewall than a man with a knife.

"Is that so?" the man asked after spitting the canteen lid on the floor. "Let me guess. Armed mercenaries with Eastern European accents?"

Well, that's oddly specific. “Something like that.”

He moved closer. Behind him, I saw Dez sneaking in the front door, closing it carefully, so it didn't make a sound. I watched him tiptoe down the hallway. *Armed mercenary, he is not.* I turned my body sideways, giving the man a smaller target.

“Why would you think I was a demon?” I asked, hoping to get him talking long enough for Dez to reach us.

The man's lip curled, and he practically spat at me when he answered. “You came here to steal that demon blade, didn't you?”

So, it was a demon dagger then. I filed away that piece of info for later. “Demons aren't real.”

It was a bald-faced lie, but the longer I talked to this guy, the surer I was that he was human. He looked like the kind of guy who bought a plot of land in Nevada, tin foiled his windows, and then spent his days putting together homemade bombs like model cars.

The man took a menacing step toward me but stopped before entering the circle. He tossed the contents of the canteen in my face and jumped back.

I sputtered. “Not cool!” I blinked the water out of my eyes. “What the hell did you do that for?”

He didn't answer, but he did drop the canteen, only to hold out the silver crucifix he wore like it would smite me.

“Oh, that was holy water, wasn't it?” I pointed at myself. “Still not a demon, moron.”

The guy wasn't a quitter though. He pulled his arm back and aimed the knife between my eyes. That's when Dez attacked. Unfortunately, he attacked by jumping on the guy's back and attempting to put him in a chokehold instead of just compelling him like a normal vamp would.

I snatched the dagger. I'd taken a step toward the back door, assuming a human would be no match for a vampire,

when the man flipped Dez over his shoulder. He pinned him with a knee to the chest and punched Dez in the face.

“Ow!” Dez shouted, scrunching his eyes closed.

I looked around for something to hit the guy with. Despite having a dagger in my hand, I didn’t want to kill anyone if I could help it. I grabbed a musket from the wall and swung it at the man like a baseball bat. It was enough to knock him off Dez.

“Compel him, you dumbass!”

Dez scrambled to his knees and moved his head back and forth like a cobra trying to catch the guy’s eye.

“Never mind.” I took another swing. This one laid the guy out flat on his face. I dropped the musket.

Dez grabbed my arm and tugged me toward the door. “Let’s get out of here,” he said.

“Not yet. We need to tie him up first. Then, we need to wake his ass up, so you can compel him to forget we were ever here.”

Dez ran a hand through his hair. “Right. Yeah. That’s a good idea.” He searched the room. “I don’t see any rope.”

I pointed at the unconscious man sprawled at our feet. “Watch him.”

I opened drawers and closets until I found an old vacuum cleaner in the hall. After unwinding it, I used the dagger to cut through the cord. When I returned, the guy was still out cold. “Get him in that chair.”

Dez hauled him into it and held him upright as I secured him. While we waited for him to wake up, I grabbed the blanket from the cot and wrapped it around my body.

The man came to with a jerk. Somehow, he managed to look dangerous even bound to a chair. Pretty impressive for a human. “You’re not a demon, and you’re sure as fuck not a human,” he accused, staring at me. “What are you?”

“I’m a shifter.” Dez was going to wipe the guy, so why not share a little. Maybe he’d open up in return. “And Dez here is a vampire.”

The man’s eyes widened a fraction before he schooled his features back into his disinterested mask.

I balanced the dagger on my fingertips, watching the way the flames within the stone seemed to flicker. “We just came for the dagger. This pretty little trinket is going to make us a lot of money.” I crouched down, so we were eye level. “Your turn. Who are you, and why do you have a demon trap over there?”

The man leaned his head forward as far as his bindings would let him. He snapped his blunt teeth and smiled.

Okay then. I turned to Dez and nodded. “Do it.” After Dez compelled him, we hightailed it out of there, anxious to put the small town and its hostile inhabitant behind us. Despite the close call, I was riding high on the thrill of pulling off my first solo heist.

CHAPTER 10



Thanks to the stash of dried cranberries I'd brought along as bribes, luring the goats into the back of the van didn't take long. After I closed them in, I walked around the van and opened the passenger side door to find Dez in my seat.

"You're going to have to drive." He pointed at his left eye, which was nearly swollen shut from that punch he took to the face. It looked painful. As a vampire, he healed far faster than a human, but supercharged healing required blood. And that was something Dez only touched when it was disguised as a cocktail.

"How long has it been since you had blood?" I asked.

"Since you quit the Sundowner."

I winced. Long enough that we couldn't stick around here waiting for his eye to heal. "You sure about this?" I eyed the driver's side. "You know I don't drive, right?"

Learning to drive was one of those bucket list items I'd never checked off. Not for lack of trying. The witches who took me in at sixteen cut their driving lessons short after I drove Helen's station wagon straight into a dumpster while backing out. Twice.

A couple years ago, I'd been tempted to enroll in driver's ed until I realized that everyone tested for their license at the end of the program. My continued survival relied on staying out of the system. A driver's license, complete with name, address, and a color photograph was the opposite of keeping a

low profile. I might as well send Carl and his goons a party invite.

Dez leaned his seat back as far as it would go. Although the goats were calmer after their extended play time and cranberry treats, one of them still nibbled on a lock of Dez's hair.

He closed his good eye, not even bothering to shoo the goat away. "Not a lot of choice here, Riley. You'll be fine."

I shrugged. It didn't seem that hard. I grabbed my clothes from the floor and got dressed. Then, I shoved the dagger under the driver's seat, adjusted my mirrors, and gunned it out of the driveway.

Dez bolted straight up in his seat. "You have to look for cars," he yelled as a car swerved into the other lane to avoid hitting us.

"Oops. My bad." The first few miles, I jerked the wheel back and forth, trying to keep the van between the lines. Eventually, I barely drifted over the center line at all. "Check this out. I'm a natural."

Dez snorted. When I glanced at him, he was clutching his head in his hands.

"You okay?" I asked.

"I'll be fine." Dez rotated his neck to work the kinks out. "That was a disaster."

"I don't know. It could have been worse," I countered.

Dez stared at me with his one good eye. "How?" Thinking better of it, he held up a hand. "You know what? I don't even want to know what your definition of worse would be."

I reached down to turn the radio on, but Dez slapped my hand.

"No distractions," he grumbled.

"There's barely any traffic out here." I looked in the rearview mirror at our four-legged passengers. "Even our friends are on their best behavior."

“Eyes on the road!” Dez glared at me, but a one-eyed glare wasn’t all that effective.

“You know what you need?” I asked.

“Ibuprofen?”

“An eye patch. You’d look badass with an eye patch.”

Dez laughed. “You’re crazy. You know that, right?”

I grinned at him. “I’m self-aware.” For the next several miles, we slipped into companionable silence—well, Dez and I did. The goats were less introspective.

“That’s our turn.” Dez’s voice jerked me out of my thoughts.

I made a hard right and overshot the turn a bit. A quick swing back, and we were out of the grass and on blacktop again. I grinned at Dez.

“Slower,” he admonished.

The next turn, I took slower. Unfortunately, K10 traffic was heavy with after-work commuters. I rolled my window down and shouted, “sorry” to the SUV I grazed. When the guy driving flipped me off, I blew him a raspberry and sped up.

“Slower,” Dez yelled.

“Okay.” I slowed the van down again, and the SUV caught up with us. I ignored the driver who was road raging and concentrated on not hitting the car in front of me.

One of the goats climbed on top of the center console and looked out the window at the guy still yelling at me. The goat spit his direction before Dez shoved him in the back. Dez unbuckled and positioned himself in the opening to prevent the others from clambering onto my lap.

I managed to make it to the goat farm without any major damage. After unloading our cargo, the owner took pity on Dez and ran in the house for a frozen bag of peas for his eye. She didn’t ask how yoga went.

By the time we reached West Bottoms, the swelling in Dez’s eye was down enough that he’d stopped flinching every

time I hit a bump. Since the van was a little worse for the wear, we'd decided to park it in the lot behind the Sundowner for tonight. I planned to drive Dez's car, which he'd parked in the same lot this morning, to his house. I could get one of the girls to pick me up at Dez's place, so I didn't have to transport a valuable dagger on a public bus.

I knew the owner of a body shop—a shifter—who might be able to pop out the dings in the van for a reasonable price. He'd worked out a payment plan for Kali when she had him fix her nearly totaled Volkswagen beetle. Hopefully, I could finagle a similar deal.

Parking a van proved more difficult than I'd anticipated. The lot at the Sundowner was full enough that the only open spots were between vehicles. I picked an opening between the crappiest cars in the lot to try to pull into, but I kept swinging the van too wide. The third time I backed out, I was so busy making sure that I didn't side-swipe the sedan next to me that I never saw the tricked-out pickup behind me.

The thud as I hit the bumper was hard enough to snap our heads forward. I slammed on the brakes and looked at Dez for directions. He groaned from the impact but reached over to put the van in park.

“Do we have insurance?” I asked.

“Maybe there won't be much damage,” Dez said hopefully as he opened his door. I put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Stay here,” I told him. “I'll take care of it.”

It wasn't until I stepped out of the van that I realized who I hit. *Of course*. I watched as a very pissed off Hopper killed his engine and climbed down out of the cab.

Everyone has their snapping point. Hopper's finger in my face was mine. I didn't think about the consequences. I just grabbed his finger and twisted, dropping him to his knees. His scream was a whole octave higher than his normal yelling voice.

Before I could climb back in the van, Max Volkov sauntered out of the bar and straight into my business. He took

one look at the scene, grabbed me by the collar and marched me to where one of his shifters was kneeling on the ground to check on Hopper.

Volkov lowered his head until his mouth was next to my ear. “What did you do?” he growled.

My shiver had more to do with his proximity than the heat in his voice. Before I could explain, Hopper lifted his hand as if to point at me, but when he spotted his finger bent at an unnatural angle, he cradled it against his chest instead and moaned.

“She ran into my truck, and then she attacked me.” He held up his hand with a wince for Volkov’s inspection.

“Hmmm,” Volkov muttered. “See to it,” he directed the tawny-haired shifter still kneeling next to Hopper. “A word,” he said to me.

Since he still had me by the collar, I didn’t have much choice but to go with him. When he deemed us a sufficient distance away from Hopper’s whining, he let go. I crossed my arms over my chest and waited for the fireworks to begin. Volkov clenched his fists and breathed through his nose as he watched Hopper stagger to his feet.

I snorted. Volkov shot me a warning look.

“What? It’s his finger, not his legs. He’s being such a drama queen.”

He didn’t argue the point, but he didn’t let me off the hook either. “What the fuck were you thinking, Riley? You can’t drive.”

I huffed. “Dez’s eye is swollen shut. He couldn’t drive, so I had to.”

Volkov frowned. “You could have called me for a ride.”

I laughed. “Riiight.”

He stiffened and looked away. Catching sight of Dez watching us through the van window, Volkov turned back to me. “What happened to his face? Did you start a fight?”

“Why would you think I started the fight?”

He looked at Hopper who was glaring at me from where he leaned against his truck. “I wonder,” he deadpanned.

“News flash. I didn’t start that either. He touched me first.”

Volkov stilled. “Hopper put his hands on you?”

The undercurrent of protectiveness in that question made me feel things I had no business feeling, especially for an alpha. I forced myself to look away. “Not like that.” For all of Hopper’s faults—and there were a lot of them—he had never given me creeper vibes. “He stuck his finger in my face.”

“Riley,” Volkov growled. “You can’t dislocate people’s fingers just because they point at you.”

I smiled sweetly. “Tell that to Hopper.”

For a second, Volkov’s eyes turned the amber of his wolf, but in a blink, he had himself back under control. “Let’s go.” He turned me around and propelled me toward his car with a hand between my shoulder blades.

I dug in my heels. “Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you home.”

I spun away from him. “No thanks. I’m good.” No way was I getting in a car with this man until I knew why he had the number of a Santa Fe private investigator tucked away in his desk drawer.

“You are not driving,” he insisted.

“Fine.” I pulled my phone out of my back pocket. “I’ll call Helen to come get me.”

Unlike me, Dez was more than happy to accept a ride home, even if it was from one of Volkov’s shifters. Volkov managed to convince Hooper not to press charges. When Hopper suggested that I could work off the damages by bartending for free, Volkov interceded before I could bust up the rest of the man’s fingers.

Eventually, I spotted Helen’s station wagon pulling in. I grabbed the dagger from under the van seat and wrapped it in

my jacket, so no one would see it before getting in Helen's car. One look at my face, and she patted my knee, put the car in drive, and gunned it out of the parking lot. She didn't spare a glance for Volkov, even when he attempted to flag her down.

She might be tiny at four-foot-ten, but she was one of the oldest and most powerful witches in Kansas City. Helen didn't pander to anyone, not even the alpha. I smiled and leaned my head against the seat.

"You want to tell me about it, hon?" Helen knew me better than most, so she didn't take offense when I told her not tonight.

I traced the outline of the dagger through my jacket. "Can you make a pit stop at the pharmacy though?" I needed to pick up a prepaid cell phone, so I could reach out to my old contacts about arranging a sale.

Helen didn't press for details, just did as I asked. When she dropped me at my apartment, I leaned over the seat and gave her a quick hug. Normally, Helen wasn't much of a hugger, but she squeezed me back tonight.

I took a quick shower before settling on my futon with my cheap burner phone in hand. When you've been out of the game as long as I had, you weren't even sure who the players were any more. I gambled on a two-bit hustler named Levon who had hated Carl almost as much as I did after Carl screwed him over on a big job. The enemy of my enemy and all that jazz. I got Levon's number from his mom who fortunately still had a landline in Santa Fe.

Using the non-traceable prepaid, I sent Levon a text to see if he would be interested in connecting me with a buyer for a ten percent cut. I didn't use my name. He wouldn't have recognized it, anyway. Back in my days as Carl's protégé, everyone called me kid. Years later, and I still bristled when anyone used that term to refer to me, but that was the name I gave Levon.

A few minutes later, the phone lit up with his answer—a vague, "Be in touch."

I tossed my phone on the futon and went straight for the kitchen to open my brand-new box of Lucky Charms. I poured a generous bowl full of cereal and added milk. It took two and a half bowls of sugary goodness to make enough room in the bag for my stolen dagger. Once it was safely nestled inside the Lucky Charms, I put the box back in the cabinet. I wasn't all that superstitious, but after a day like today, I could use all the luck I could get.

After days passed in radio silence, I got antsy and shot off another text. Levon finally answered with a terse "working on it," leaving me with nothing to do while I waited for his hookup. Since I was now unemployed, I didn't even have a bartending gig to distract me.

CHAPTER 11



When Kali asked for help sending a demon back to hell, I didn't hesitate. I arrived at the cave early, meeting Kali at the entrance. Although demons were normally relegated to a hell plane, there were two ways they ended up in our world. Both began with a summoning ritual that called forth the demon. Once on our plane, the demon could either be anchored to the living person who summoned him, as Zepar was, or hosted in a dying one, which was how vampires were made. Because Kali had been the one to call Zepar to our plane, she was his anchor. That also meant he was in full demon form. We were all anxious to cut the thread that held him here and send him back where he belonged.

Kali eyed my bag of weapons. "What did you bring?"

If you looked past her colorful headband and dangly earrings, she might pass for a fighter. She'd certainly dressed for the part in her form-fitting all black ensemble. I loved this girl. Even faced with a demon fight, she couldn't resist accessorizing.

I opened my duffle with a grin. Inside, I'd stuffed a wide variety of useful tools. My favorite was the flamethrower I'd bought off eBay months ago. I'd ordered it to deal with an infestation of cockroaches who thought they could freeload as my roommates. Helen had convinced me to try bug bombing the place first, and it had worked. I may not have flambéed the roaches, but at least this bad boy would be put to good use now.

Kali examined it. “Where are we going to stash a flame thrower?”

I took it out of her hands. “We’re not.” I hooked it up to the hose attached to my backpack and brandished it like an assault rifle.

When Meira joined us in the cave, she shook her head in disapproval at my weapon of choice. *Whatever.* Once Meira had cast a salt circle, Kali and I took up positions inside the circle and waited for Meira to do her job. Because our last attempt at a summoning was a bust, we left the logistics to her.

When Zepar finally made his appearance, I staggered back a step. “You.”

The red sweatshirt he wore was the same one he had on at the Sundowner when he’d told me all about a magical dagger for sale over shots of whiskey. Now that I got a good look at him, my stomach pitched at the red eyes and black horns. Without the hood to hide behind or the strong cologne he’d worn at the bar to mask the smell of sulfur, there was no doubt what he was—one hundred percent demon. Suddenly, the pentagram ringed with salt at the museum made a lot more sense. Maybe the guy I’d stolen the dagger from had it right after all.

This demon had played me from the beginning, dangling that dagger like a carrot. And I’d jumped at the bait, never once questioning why a stranger at the bar seemed so invested in convincing me of its value. I narrowed my eyes, remembering the innocuous brushes of his hand while I poured him drink after drink. Some demons could read people’s desires through touch. Had he simply read my desire for my old life and sent me after the dagger? Or had he walked into the Sundowner looking for me?

Kali looked between us. “He tried to get to you, too, didn’t he?”

Zepar tsked. “You didn’t tell her, kid? I thought you were friends.”

Kali swiveled her head my way. “What is he talking about?”

Had he told me about the dagger merely as a way to get to Kali? I didn’t miss the note of hurt in her voice, and I flinched. I hated keeping secrets from her, but I hadn’t wanted to drag her into this mess. Little had I known, she’d always been neck-deep in it.

As I faced the demon now, he didn’t even attempt to conceal the fanatical interest gleaming in his eyes. It was the same look he’d worn the night he’d told me about the dagger. I wondered what his end game was. Maybe, this hadn’t been about Kali at all. He’d used me to get that dagger because he wanted it for something. I just didn’t know what.

“Did she try to talk you out of stealing it?” the demon asked. “So predictable.”

I kept my expression blank and stared back at him, not willing to give him any more aid than I already had. I might have stolen that dagger, but that didn’t mean I would be handing it to a demon if I could help it. I had too much riding on selling it to lose the dagger now.

He smiled. “But you still want it, don’t you? All those big players are after it, men with power and money to burn. They don’t care who they hurt to get what they want. They’re not the ones taking risks. I’ll bet the alpha thinks he’s got you leashed. But it’d be so easy for you to take it, wouldn’t it?” Zepar watched me, clearly waiting for some hint that I had the dagger.

I let him see the interest in my gaze. If he thought I still wanted to go after it, he wouldn’t suspect I already had it. “If I wanted the dagger, I’d take it. I don’t need you for that.”

His jaw tightened, and his forearm muscles tensed. *What kind of plans did he have for that dagger?* I couldn’t risk asking. If we miscalculated, and he made it out of this circle, I didn’t want him getting his hands on the dagger.

While Kali and Meira worked their necromancer magic, I mentally catalogued how stealing that dagger could have

screwed me over. If we didn't succeed in banishing Zepar here and now, I'd be playing keep away with a demon for the foreseeable future. I didn't like my odds in that scenario.

It took Zepar taking a swing at Kali to snap me out of my musings. She ducked, barely avoiding his fist. I couldn't afford distractions, so I focused on the demon in front of me.

"Stay down," I yelled at Kali.

I flipped the flamethrower on and blasted the demon in the chest. Although the flames licked up his torso and caught the strands of his hair on fire, he smiled through it all and held his hands out to his sides. He roared, and the cave trembled.

Zepar turned to Meira, who was still chanting in the background and ordered her to attack me. I narrowed my eyes. *Why not order me to stop?* Unless he knew I couldn't be compelled.

I didn't have time to worry about it because Meira lunged at me. She may have been spry for a fifty-something, but I was a scrapper who was used to taking on much more dangerous opponents. I waited for her to tire herself out, dancing out of reach. When I saw my opening, I put her in a sleeper hold and lowered her body to the ground.

I stood and turned back to the action, not seeing Zepar's fist until it was too late. His blow snapped my head back, and then all I saw was black.

CHAPTER 12



When I woke, I was no longer in the cave, the soft give of a mattress beneath me. I reached up and touched the knot on my head. The fight came back to me in sharp relief. Because I wasn't in the cave, I hoped that meant we won.

I sat up slowly, blinking until the blurry room came into focus. I didn't recognize the bed I found myself tucked into. The scent of cedarwood and spice was familiar though. I didn't have to turn my head to know Max Volkov was nearby.

"Did it work?" I asked, my voice scratchy.

"Yes. Zepar is back where he belongs." He sounded tired.

I pulled my feet from under the heavy comforter and swung them off the side of the bed. Volkov sat in an upholstered side chair. He was dressed in black sweats and a gray t-shirt that molded to his muscular torso. Paired with the five o'clock shadow and ruffled midnight hair, he looked like he'd just stumbled out of bed. Since only my side was messed up, it hadn't been beside me if he'd gotten any sleep at all.

"How long have I been out?"

"Ten hours, give or take," he said. "You took a nasty blow to the head. Your body needed time to heal."

Although shifters' bodies were capable of healing injuries that would kill an average human, we weren't invincible. Volkov didn't have to tell me I was lucky to be awake at all. That demon packed one hell of a punch, and I was still reeling

from the effects of it. I rolled my shoulders, easing the tense muscles.

I looked at Volkov whose glacial blue eyes had never wavered from studying my face. “Why did you bring me here?”

A flicker of something crossed his features, but it was gone before I could dissect what it meant. “You needed someone to watch over you.”

I braced myself on the bed and scooted to the edge. “And that was you?”

He let out a breath and dropped his gaze to the floor. The quiet grew stifling.

“Thank you,” I managed. And I meant it. Whatever happened between us in the future, I was grateful for this.

“Here.” He handed me a glass of cold water, holding it to my lips as I took a sip. When I’d had my fill, he set it back on the nightstand. I didn’t know what to make of this side of him. His presence filled the room, and I struggled under the weight of it.

I surveyed the room as I gained my bearings. It wasn’t the kind of bedroom I would’ve expected from a man like Volkov. There were no showy finishes or ostentatious furnishings. It was a room straight out of a ski resort—all muted linens and oversized mission-style windows. There were no curtains or shades to obstruct the expansive views of the wooded area behind his house. I imagined the morning light streaming through those windows, Volkov waking with the sun.

A stone fireplace anchored the wall next to the bed, and he’d built a real fire in it while I slept. I watched the flames and thought of the dagger still hidden away in my apartment. With Zepar gone, I’d never know what he wanted that dagger for or why he sent me after it. Whatever the reason, it was still my best shot at staying one step ahead of the wolves in my old pack who were no doubt gunning for me.

“Listen Volkov, I appreciate you taking care of me.”

“Max,” he corrected. The low rumble of his voice felt intimate here in his space. I didn’t want to be lulled by it, so I stood up on wobbly feet. I was still wearing my t-shirt, but my legs were bare. I looked around the room for my pants, but swayed when a bout of dizziness took me.

Volkov was on his feet, his arm braced around my back before I could fall. His body was warm where it pressed against mine, and the temptation to lean into his steady strength rose. I took a step sideways instead, and he let me go.

He looked away, hands fisting at his sides. “Why won’t you let me help you?”

“I can stand on my own.” It came out harsher than I’d intended.

His body stiffened until he was no longer the man who had watched over me as I slept. It was like a switch flipped, and he was back in alpha mode.

Maybe it was the head injury, or maybe I was just tired of dancing around it. Either way, the question left my lips before I thought better of it. “That day in the library, I saw the phone number you kept locked in your desk drawer.”

Volkov stilled. “You shouldn’t have been able to get into that drawer.”

“Why? Because it was locked?” Breaking into a simple lock mechanism was child’s play.

“Because it was warded,” he said.

Whoever he’d paid to ward that drawer ripped him off because I didn’t feel a trace of magic when I opened it. Not that I had a lot of experience breaking through wards to know what they felt like.

I swallowed past the fear that any reminder of my past seemed to dredge up and asked the question that had been torturing me. “Why are you in contact with a private investigator in Santa Fe?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “We can discuss this when you’re feeling better.”

“So, it was about me.” I fought the urge to run—pants or no pants—and waited for his answer.

“It was.” He walked over to a dresser and returned with my jeans. “Get dressed. I’ll tell you about the P.I. while you eat.” This time, he made no move to steady me when I swayed.

I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled the jeans on one leg at a time. I grew steadier on my feet as I made my way to his kitchen. I perched on a stool next to the kitchen island and watched as he pulled deli meat and cheese from the refrigerator. Volkov made a quick sandwich and slid the plate toward me. He didn’t sit down next to me.

I started to ask a question, but he silenced me with a shake of his head. “Eat first. Then, we’ll talk.”

I dutifully ate the sandwich, my nerves making it go down like sawdust. After following it with a glass of milk, I pushed the plate away and waited for him to start talking.

“A couple months ago, I got a call from the Santa Fe alpha.” He watched for my reaction.

Only years of practice tamping down panic allowed me to maintain a neutral expression. “His name?”

“Carl Ray.”

Even though I’d braced for it, the sound of Carl’s name on Volkov’s tongue was like a punch to the gut. I gripped the edge of the countertop hard enough to turn my knuckles white. Volkov didn’t miss my sudden tension, but he didn’t comment on it.

“He wanted to know if a member of his pack—a runaway—landed in my territory some years ago. He gave me a name and a description.”

“What did you tell Carl?” My voice broke on his name.

Volkov looked me in the eye when he answered, his wolf just beneath the surface. “I told him no one matching his description was in my territory. It seems like the Riley he was looking for was a mousy little thing.” One side of his mouth

tipped up as he took in my hair. “He didn’t let it go easily, called back again a week or so later to ask permission to send in one of his men to look for you.”

The breath sawed in and out of my lungs until I could speak again. “And?”

Shifters were territorial creatures. Venturing into Kansas City without Volkov’s permission was like an act of war. If Volkov had been a weaker alpha, Carl wouldn’t have asked. I just hoped Volkov’s reputation was enough to deter Carl.

“I told him if I spotted one of his men in my territory, I’d be sending him back in pieces.”

From the look on his face, I knew he wasn’t bluffing.

“And then, I hired a P.I. to dig up every last piece of dirt on Carl Ray that he could find.”

“What did he find?” Part of me didn’t want to know.

I’d buried that Riley when I’d left New Mexico, and I hated the idea of Volkov or anyone here in my new life knowing the version of me I had to be to survive Carl. I made myself look at him, to face whatever bullshit pity I found there.

The only thing I found was a steely determination that I couldn’t quite interpret. Was it the thought of another encroaching on his territory that put it there? Or was it more personal? I couldn’t afford to dwell on it.

“The P.I. hasn’t sent me the report yet.” He turned his back to me to pour himself a cup of coffee. “Is there anything you need to tell me?”

“No.” I moved past him to put my dirty dishes in the sink, wondering how much dirt his P.I. could deliver. Carl was no boy scout, but he was a master at covering his tracks. It was the first thing he taught me, and I’d used every bit of that lesson to escape him. But if there was something in that report I could use as leverage to make Carl back off, I needed it sooner rather than later.

Volkov's body brushed against my side as he added his cup to the pile in the sink. "If there's something you're running from—"

He looked down at me, and for a second, I thought he saw past my cotton candy hair and easy smiles. I held my breath.

Volkov braced a hand on my shoulder and gave me a reassuring squeeze. "Whatever you did—I can help you. But you need to tell me what's going on."

Whatever I did. I stepped back, breaking the charged connection between us. I kept my shoulders loose even as I shrugged off his hand. To him, I was something to be fixed, something to be managed.

I lifted my chin because I wasn't broken. The last thing I needed was another alpha trying to control my life. "There's nothing to tell."

He let his hand drop back to his side. "Then, I guess we're done here." He grabbed his keys from the counter and headed for the garage. "Let's go. I'll take you home."

CHAPTER 13



Volkov deposited me in front of my apartment and sped off without another word. When I didn't hear from him the next week, it gave me plenty of time to stew about it, especially since I hadn't heard a peep from my contact about a buyer.

I imagined the kind of information his private investigator might dig up. For the first day, I worried about the jobs Carl had sent me on and the things I'd stolen for him. Not that any of that would be a news flash to Volkov. Our first run-in was the day I arrived in Kansas City, and I'd lifted the wallet off one of his rich friends. Getting a report of my juvenile delinquency would be exactly what he'd expect.

What I was really interested in was the kind of dirt this P.I. might dig up on Carl. Because Carl ruled his pack with an iron fist, most of his wolves wouldn't dare cross him. A man like Carl made a lot of enemies though. Maybe there was something he'd buried, something I could use. Blackmail was a dirty business, but I'd jump in feet first if it got Carl off my back. To do that though, I needed a look at the report. Surely, Volkov had it by now.

For a man who hounded me at every turn trying to get me to give up my autonomy for the safety of his pack, Volkov's sudden absence was unnerving. After several days of crickets, I shot him a thanks-for-patching-me-up text. He didn't reply.

I'd even braved Hopper's ire to swing by the Sundowner, hoping to bump into Volkov there. Two hours perched on a bar

stool next to Dez had been a complete waste of time. Volkov hadn't shown.

By the following Saturday, I couldn't take the wait any longer. Not only did Volkov seem to be avoiding me, but I still didn't have a lead on a buyer. I knew better than to get in a hurry. Finding a buyer for a rare magical artifact like this dagger took time, and rushing was the surest way to get myself caught. Still, I was getting antsy. When Helen called to say we'd be short a couple players for our regular paintball game, I saw it for the opportunity it was.

There was one surefire way to get Volkov to come to me, even if I did feel a little guilty using it. Before I could talk myself out of it, I sent a text telling him I got into some trouble and needed backup. This time, he answered immediately, asking where I was. Kali arrived before I could text a response.

I scanned her outfit as I let her in. "What are you wearing?" While I'd dressed for war, she was wearing cute hiking boots and a scoop necked sweater, every hair in place.

"What?" she asked defensively. "Just because we're shooting people doesn't mean I can't look cute."

I'd missed this. I'd been so wrapped up in my own problems lately, I hadn't spent much time with her. My phone lit up.

Kali raised a brow when I ignored it. "You gonna get that?"

"Nah. Probably a telemarketer. They've been calling all morning trying to sell me cable TV."

I pocketed my phone and opened the door. Kali led the way down the stairs, giving me a chance to text Volkov to tell him to meet me in twenty minutes. I sent the address of the paintball range and hoped he wouldn't take the time to Google it.

By the time we arrived, Helen and the girls were already there. Helen, Bea, Alyce, and Janis might all be in their sixties and seventies, but paintball had been their idea. Because we all

needed an outlet to blow off steam, we'd spent most of our Saturdays here since discovering the place. *You'd think we'd be better at it by now.*

Alyce was sitting this one out because her hip was acting up, and one of our other regulars was out of town. This week, Janis had brought her twenty-four-year-old niece Olivia to fill in for our third missing player. From her bumbling with the paintball gun, I didn't think she was going to be an asset.

Kali nudged my hip. "What are you scowling at?"

I'd let my thoughts drift to Carl again. Looking at my friends laugh and joke as they prepared to shoot paintballs, I relaxed. Kali followed my gaze to where Olivia was trying to figure out how to work the paintball gun. "I think she's going to be a liability." I nudged Kali. "We better not lose."

"We always lose," she countered with a laugh.

"Not this time." We were all due for a win, and the men who were going to help deliver it were arriving now.

I waved at Volkov, who was stalking toward us with murder in his eyes. *Maybe that text wasn't the best way to get him to stop avoiding me.* Too late now.

He'd brought Craig Ward, the Tribunal's enforcer, with him. Craig was a mountain of a man, with steely gray eyes and a shaved head that made him look like the stone-cold killer he could be. His face softened whenever he looked at Kali though.

People who didn't know Kali like I did took her at face value. They saw a rockabilly pinup girl with a flair for drama. When I looked at her, I saw a kindred soul forged in fire. I wanted her to have the kind of love that was worthy of her. The kind of love my parents had. I didn't know if Craig was it, but he was both fierce and loyal—two things she could definitely use in her corner.

Kali took one look at Max Volkov and bent her head close to mine to whisper through the side of her mouth. "I don't think he's going to play."

I smirked. "He'll play."

Any hint of gentleness I glimpsed while at his house was long gone. The man who stomped toward me was one hundred percent pissed off alpha. “Why the fuck are we here, Riley?”

I grabbed his wrists and ignored the charge that passed between us. “Come on. I’ll explain while you gear up.”

Despite a lot of bitching, all it took was a few digs from our rival paintball team, and eventually both men were goaded into playing. I flipped the other team the bird before tugging Volkov to the ground behind a stack of old tires. There was barely enough cover to shield both of us as we stretched out on our stomachs, so I crowded closer to him.

He stiffened but didn’t move away. “Why am I really here, Cruz?”

He’d never referred to me by my last name before, like I was some locker room teammate. I didn’t like it. “Oh, is that how it’s going to be now?”

When the other team let the first paintball fly, he wrapped an arm around my waist and tucked me against him. “Tell you what. I’ll use your first name when you start using mine.”

I was hyperconscious of his hand curled around my hip. “Fine,” I said. “Max. You’ve been avoiding me.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Busy?” I challenged. It was an excuse, and we both knew it. He was always busy. That had never stopped him from tracking me down before.

“Some of us have responsibilities, you know.”

I ignored his implication that I did not. “Did you get the P.I.’s report yet?”

His grip tightened on my hip. “Afraid I’m going to find out something you’d rather I not know?”

“Hardly,” I scoffed.

Volkov looked over to where Craig and Kali were crouched behind a half wall and nodded at Craig. Then, he was on his feet moving down field, leaving me sprawled in the dirt

waiting for his answer. I ground my teeth. *Two could play at war.*

After a few minutes, I army crawled my way to Kali, unable to stop myself from staring at Volkov as I went. He and Craig moved like they'd done this a thousand times, alternating taking shots and covering each other. Neither man missed a target.

When I reached Kali's side, Helen was loading her gun with her special stash of paintballs. "I need to get closer," she said.

Out of all the witches, Helen was the backbone. She was tough as nails and held a grudge like no one else I knew. The last time we were here, a couple of the twenty-somethings on the other team made a lot of old women jokes. Helen was looking for payback.

I fist bumped her. "Get behind me. We're going in." Helen crowded against my back.

I left the stealth to the men and opted for a full-on frontal assault, using my body to shield Helen's slight frame as we ran down field. I took several paintballs to the chest, but I got Helen close enough that she unloaded her custom-made paintballs on our competition. She'd spent a week perfecting the recipe, and the result was a cross between a two-day-old deer carcass left to rot and a teenage boy's ass.

The other team all but gave up just to get away from that smell. Even Volkov and Craig looked a little green. Helen and I high fived and laughed our way back to the benches.

Now that the fighting was over, I cornered Volkov who was putting his borrowed paintball gun back in our stash. "Well?" I prompted.

"Tell you what," he said. "You can read it for yourself."

I stilled, my heart beating fast enough he could have heard it even without his heightened shifter senses. "When?"

He waived off Janis's offer of after-war snacks with a look of utter disdain. When he turned back to me, his face hadn't softened at all. I wondered what was in that report.

His phone rang before he gave me an answer. When he hung up, he spoke to Craig, but his eyes never left me. “We need to go. There’s been an attack.”

CHAPTER 14



The attack turned out to be a ritual murder of a local witch. According to Kali, who'd been called in to talk to the dead witch, all signs pointed to it being a botched demon summoning. It looked like Kansas City's demon problem wasn't limited to Zepar.

Other than a terse call from Volkov warning me to "stay the fuck inside," I hadn't heard from him. I assumed Volkov was too busy heading the investigation to meet and discuss the P.I. report.

A couple days after the attack, I noticed the scent of an unfamiliar shifter outside my apartment complex. Although I never spotted any of Volkov's wolves, I bet he'd assigned someone guard duty until the witch killer could be caught. After several days of being trapped in my apartment, the thought of spending one more minute staring at the peeling paint made me homicidal.

When Dez called to complain that the new bartender at the Sundowner was a dick who served drinks made with real tomato juice instead of O positive, I jumped at the chance to play personal bartender. An hour later, we loaded the back of his mini car with a bottle of cheap tequila, Bloody Mary mix, and a bag of blood. Then, we headed to Kali's for an impromptu movie night.

"How much does she know?" Dez asked as we drove.

A pang of guilt hit me. There was so much that I was keeping from her—the dagger, the threat from Carl, even

quitting my job at the Sundowner. There had been so many times that I'd reached for my phone, wanting to tell her what was going on. I'd stopped myself because Kali was neck deep in her own trouble and didn't need mine piled on top.

My contact still hadn't produced a buyer for the dagger. I knew it took time to find buyers with enough money for an artifact like this, but that did nothing to settle my nerves. Not knowing what was in that P.I. report just intensified the dread tightening my stomach. Carl already contacted Volkov twice. How long before he decided to investigate for himself? Once I had the money to disappear, how long would it be until I needed it?

This time, I couldn't just skip town without saying goodbye like I had in Santa Fe. There, I had no one left who cared about me. Things were different here. Helen and the girls were family, and they would hunt the ends of the earth to find out what happened to me. I'd take blackmail over running if it meant I could stay here because the thought of telling them I was leaving gave me a stomachache.

Kali wasn't the kind of woman to file a missing person report on me and move on either. She was a woman who spent a decade trying to find justice for her twin sister who had been killed in a hit and run when they were fifteen. There was zero chance she'd leave it alone if I disappeared. I'd never shared the details of my life in Carl's pack with her, but Kali knew enough about my history that Santa Fe would be the first place she'd go digging. And I'd seen what happened to people who went up against Carl. I didn't want Kali anywhere near him.

If I had to run from Carl again, I'd have to tell the people I loved that I was leaving. I just prayed there was something in that P.I. report that gave me another option.

Dez turned onto Kali's street. "Sometimes you have to let people in, Riley."

I bit my lip and stared at the familiar buildings we passed. "I don't want anyone to get hurt."

"I get that, but your friends don't want to see you hurt either." Dez parked in the lot near Kali's apartment and turned

in his seat. He was more serious than I'd ever seen him. "And take it from me, trying to take on the world by yourself is a surefire way to wind up dead." Dez looked in the rearview mirror, his eyes shining red in the dim interior of his car. "Or worse." He blinked, and the demon inside receded.

Dez had never told me how he'd been turned, and I hadn't pried. We didn't have that kind of friendship—or at least, we hadn't before stealing the dagger together. Grand larceny seemed to have bonded us like soldiers in the trenches.

"Is that how you ended up a vampire?" I asked.

Vampires were made when a witch summoned a demon and offered a human host. The only thing separating a corpse and a vampire was the demon fused to the human soul inside. In order to inhabit a human, the demon had to latch on to the soul as it was leaving the body. Thankfully, the small window of opportunity and the power needed to perform the ritual to summon the demon served as vamp population control.

Once bonded, the demon was what kept the human alive. Unlike the Hollywood version, actual vampires still retained their human souls. That meant the people housing them knew what they became. They didn't lose their personality. The retention of the human soul ensured that much. But the demon inside was like a toothache—a persistent dull throb that eventually wore the host down until it was easy for the demon to exert his will. The stronger the demon, the stronger the vampire. In Dez's case, it was clearly a low-level demon who hitched a ride.

Dez shut off the car and looked away. "That's a story for another time. My point is you don't have to go it alone."

I unbuckled and gave him a hug. Dez froze but eventually patted my back awkwardly before disentangling from my arms. I grabbed the supplies and led the way up the stairs to Kali's apartment.

Dez was right. I needed to talk to her about what was going on. Initially, I'd kept it from her because she had her own shit to handle, but Zepar was gone now. Things had settled back to normal.

I knocked, feeling lighter now that the decision was made. Kali opened the door wearing a ratty terrycloth robe and a messy bun. I shoved the supplies at Dez and wrapped her in a hug. “What’s wrong?”

She gave me a watery smile and squeezed me back. “I’m fine.”

“Not wearing that robe you’re not.” I tapped her bun. “And I didn’t even think you knew how to put your hair in a messy bun.”

Kali laughed, but the hiccup that followed told me she’d been crying. She spotted Dez on the landing with a grocery bag in one hand and a blood bag dangling from his other hand. She didn’t bat an eye. “Come in. Let me take those.”

No introductions were needed. Although Dez and Kali weren’t friends, they were on a first-name basis. West Bottoms was a tight-knit neighborhood where the supernaturals knew each other. Dez handed over the supplies and cleared his throat. He looked like he’d rather be anywhere but here. He probably hadn’t anticipated tears when I’d floated the idea of coming.

Kali pointed to her movie collection. “Why don’t you pick, Dez?”

He deposited the bag on the kitchen table and put the blood bag in the refrigerator. Then, he stared wide-eyed at the stacks of vintage movies surrounding her television. “Woah. Are those VHS tapes?”

“The real deal,” she said.

Although Kali was only a couple years older than Dez and me, she embraced all things retro from her wardrobe to the collection of her mother’s old eighties movies she’d carted around since childhood. While Dez occupied himself choosing a movie, Kali and I settled onto her couch.

“Is this about the witch murder?” I asked.

She nodded. Spending an afternoon interrogating a murder victim would be awful. No wonder she was a mess. Apparently, the victim had no idea who had killed her and few

clues that could help Craig and Volkov hunt down whoever had murdered the poor woman.

“I thought I was okay.” Kali fidgeted with the edge of her robe and blinked back tears.

“Hey, no one would be okay after that.” I handed her a tissue. “Now, are you gonna cry, or what?”

Kali laughed as I’d intended, snatching the tissue out of my hand. She wiped her eyes, her expression pinched. “She was so young, Riley. She looked like someone’s kindergarten teacher.” Kali blew her nose and stood up to throw the tissue away. When she came back, she had the bottle of tequila in her hand and a wobbly smile on her lips. “Alright. Who’s up for a drink?”

Dez perked up. “I’m in.” He handed Kali a campy horror movie.

She beamed at him in approval. “Solid choice.”

I made drinks for them and poured a glass of milk for myself while they argued over classic movies like old friends. I shoved aside any thoughts of adding my own problems to her burden and passed out the drinks.

Dez and I sat on either side of Kali and did our best to distract her with our bad impersonations during the movie. We were all laughing when my phone screen lit up with a text from Levon. *Got a bite. More soon.*

I met Dez’s questioning look over the top of Kali’s head and nodded. With any luck, by this time next week, we’d both be a lot richer, and the dagger would be in someone else’s hands.

After a few shots and half a movie, Kali stood. “I almost forgot.” She grabbed a flyer from her refrigerator and waved it around excitedly. “We should totally do this!”

I took the flyer with a chuckle. It was for a new tattoo place opening in West Bottoms. The flyer advertised a grand opening special. “You want to get a tattoo?” I asked dubiously. Unlike me, Kali didn’t have any ink. She’d never expressed a desire to get any before either.

“Yup.” She clinked her shot glass against Dez’s half empty Bloody Mary. “You should come, too,” she told Dez, who paled at the thought.

“Dez is a bit squeamish when it comes to needles,” I said.

She patted him on the head. “That’s okay. We’ll get you a temporary tattoo off Etsy, so you don’t feel left out.”

He rubbed his jaw. “Um, thanks?”

Normally, I was not the voice of reason. In this situation though, I didn’t want to encourage a tequila-fueled decision she’d punch me for later. “I don’t know, Kali.”

She snatched the flyer back. “Oh, I’m getting a tattoo.” She sat her drink on the coffee table before tugging her shirt to the side to expose the demon mark Zepar had carved into her skin during one of their run-ins. She tapped the new scar tissue. “Right here.”

I understood the need to obliterate the mark he left on her better than most. “Hell, yeah you are,” I agreed. I held out my hand for the flyer and reached for my phone.

Ten o’clock at night was hardly tattoo parlor hours, but the guy answered the phone after a couple rings. Some things were meant to be, and apparently, us getting tattoos tomorrow morning from a guy named Dingo was one of them.

CHAPTER 15



*K*ali ended up with a gorgeous crow tattoo, complete with blue-black wings that fluttered against her chest. Literally. It turned out, Dingo got his hands on some kind of magic ink that transformed a normal tattoo into a talisman for those deemed worthy.

I walked out of his shop with a pretty—but completely devoid of magic—sepia goat head tattoo on the inside of my wrist. Even the ink judged me as lacking.

If that wasn't insult enough, I came out of the old warehouse where Dingo had set up shop to find Max Volkov leaning insolently against a light pole, lying in wait. My pulse kicked up until I noticed he'd come empty-handed. *No P.I. report then.*

"Max," I greeted him politely. "How did you know I was here?"

"Dez." He scanned the area, grimacing when he spotted the broken bottle and half-rolled condom in the gutter next to his feet.

It wasn't the condom that looked out of place in this neighborhood. Volkov wore tailored gray pants and a crisp, white dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up to show off tanned forearms. Even dressed in business attire, no one would mistake the man for anything other than the predator he was. I jerked my eyes away.

"Tell me you did not get a tattoo from a place like this," he said, his voice dripping with distaste.

I held my gauze-covered wrist up. “Sure did.”

Kali tilted her oversized sunglasses down and looked between the two of us with a frown. She probably wondered why the Kansas City alpha was hunting me down bright and early this morning. That made two of us. She leaned closer to me, watching Volkov like he was a rattlesnake poised to strike.

We had planned to part ways. Kali had a slate of custom orders to finish today, and I told her I had an errand to take care of. And I did. I needed to get Levon a high rez photo of the dagger to show a potential buyer.

“Are you good, here?” she asked. “With him?”

Volkov bristled at Kali’s implication I was not safe with him.

I headed off the brewing confrontation. Kali and Volkov were barely civil to one another on a good day. “I’m good. We’ll catch up later.” After Kali was a half a block away, I turned on Volkov. “Why are you here, Max?”

His hands were empty, so he didn’t come to deliver me the promised copy of that report. I waited for him to hit me with whatever it was that brought him out to a run-down warehouse to intercept me.

He pulled out his standard line. “We need to talk.”

“So, talk.” When he didn’t say anything, I stepped away from the building and started walking toward the bus stop. I told Levon I’d get him the photo within the hour, which meant I didn’t have time to stand around waiting for Volkov to get to his point.

He fell into step beside me. “Where are you going?”

I stopped at a crosswalk to wait for a trickle of cars to pass by. “My apartment.”

Volkov looked confused since my apartment was the other direction. The distance was walkable, but the bus was usually faster. Plus, I wasn’t in the mood for a stroll today.

Volkov stared at the empty bus stop ahead of us. “Are you taking a public bus?” Based on his tone, I was guessing he’d

never stepped foot on public transit.

Oh, the horror. I huffed out a laugh and kept walking. “Yup. That’s what us non-driving poor people do.”

He halted me with a hand on my bicep. “I’ll drive.”

Volkov driving me would definitely be faster than the bus. “Fine, but we talk on the way. I have things to do today.”

“Fine.”

When we reached his shiny new Audi, Volkov opened the door for me. As soon as he closed it, I turned on the seat warmer—not because I was cold but because it was one of those little luxuries that had no place in my regular life. *I’ll bet he has a full-service bidet in his bathroom, too.* I mentally kicked myself for not checking when I had the chance.

The drive to my apartment was a short one, so I didn’t waste time. “Did you bring the report?”

His hand tensed on the wheel. “I did not. We can discuss that later.” He merged into traffic like he did most things—aggressively. The guy in the car he just cut off honked his horn. Volkov didn’t spare him a glance. “I assume Kali told you about the witch murder.”

I crossed my arms, knowing exactly where this was headed. “She did.” *Three, two, one...*

“It not safe for you to be on your own right now.”

And there it was. As soon as I scented a shifter skulking around my apartment, I knew it was only a matter of time before Volkov showed up himself to insist that the only way I’d be safe would be if I gave up my autonomy for pack protection.

“Look, that woman’s death was a tragedy, but it has nothing to do with me,” I argued. “People are killed every day.”

“Not like this.” He scowled, and I wondered if he was recalling the gruesome scene. Even though the victim wasn’t a shifter, as a member of the Tribunal, Volkov was called in to deal with most supernatural crimes of this magnitude. I didn’t

envy him that job. “Worse,” he continued. “There’s been another witch murdered. Same M.O.”

“Here?” Two witch killings in a matter of days were concerning.

Volkov turned onto my street, driving as if speed limits didn’t apply to him. “No. This one was in Chicago. Craig is going to check it out.”

“Okay, but last I checked, I wasn’t a witch,” I pointed out.

He parked by my apartment building and cut the engine. “We don’t know yet whether the killer is targeting only witches, or if he’s going after powerful supernaturals in general.”

I snorted. “The key word there buddy is powerful. I shift into a goat.”

“And you’re immune to compulsion,” he grumbled. It was clear he wasn’t thrilled with the idea that he couldn’t order me around. “That makes you a hot commodity in some circles.”

Didn’t I know it.

“Until we know who the killer is targeting, it would be best if you stayed at the house.” Volkov tensed, as if bracing for the argument.

I pointed at him. “Your house?” My voice pitched higher than I’d intended. I was prepared for his standard join-the-pack recruitment spiel, not this. “That’s a really bad idea. How about I keep the pepper spray handy instead?” I was out of the car before he had time to open his door. I leaned my head back inside. “Thanks for the ride!”

The sound of his car door slamming didn’t surprise me. He wasn’t an easy man to shake. I stopped abruptly, and he walked into my back. He grabbed ahold of me to stop me from pitching forward from the impact.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’ll walk you up.” He nudged me forward and kept pace behind me despite my attempt to get him to leave.

I pointed to the apartment at the top of the stairs. “That’s me.” I didn’t turn around to see his reaction to the hovel I lived in. Although he’d dropped me off a time or two, he’d never actually come inside the building before.

As if on cue, the lone working bulb in the hallway flickered twice and then blew out. The landing, if you could call it that, wasn’t much wider than the stairs. Volkov’s body was entirely too close to mine as I fumbled my keys to open the door.

“Thanks for the escort, but I’ve got it from here. I’ll swing by later to—” The words died on my lips as the state of my apartment hit me.

Volkov took one look at the slashed futon and upturned furniture and muscled past me into the room. “Stay,” he ordered, as if I were a golden retriever.

My first thought was that Carl had found me. My heart jackhammered inside my chest, and I grabbed ahold of the door frame to steady myself. If it were Carl though, he wouldn’t have trashed the place. He would have simply sat in the dark and waited for me to come home.

I took a few seconds to take in the scene. Whoever had done this wasn’t a shifter. My nose was sure of that.

I broke out in a cold sweat as I considered the other possibility. *The dagger.* I barreled into the apartment and headed straight to my kitchen. *Please still be there. Please still be there,* I chanted in my head.

Although the kitchen cabinet doors were thrown wide open, the box of Lucky Charms sat on the shelf exactly as I’d left it. With Volkov in the room, I couldn’t exactly root through a box of cereal to make sure the dagger was still inside.

Volkov’s shout drew my attention. The window to the fire escape was wide open. Volkov leaned out, yelling at whoever had climbed through it to stop. When he climbed out after the burglar, I moved closer to get a better look.

The only person who knew I'd taken the dagger was Dez, but I couldn't see him trying to rip me off. The squishy part of me that had gotten attached to Dez didn't want to consider he was capable of screwing me over like that, even if he was a vamp. The rationale part of me was equally skeptical. I was the one with the shady contacts to sell the thing, after all. What would he do with it? Take it to the neighborhood pawn shop?

I skidded to a stop and leaned out the window. Whoever broke in was sprinting down the alley, Volkov giving chase. Instead of running for the street like ninety percent of the population would do when being chased by a man like Volkov, the guy pivoted, gun in hand. He didn't hesitate as he popped off two shots.

I screamed, trying to draw the man's attention. Volkov dove behind a dumpster for cover. I watched as Volkov reached for his own gun in an ankle holster I didn't even know he wore. By the time Volkov stood to take a shot, the man had already reached the busy street. The guy disappeared among the cars and pedestrians like a pro.

From where I was standing, I had gotten a good enough look to know exactly who had been inside my home. It was the man I'd stolen the dagger from. I grabbed my phone and shot Dez a message before Volkov returned. *We've got a problem. Watch your back.* I kept the message purposely vague since I was sending it from my cell phone rather than the burner. I'd grill Dez about his shoddy compulsion skills later. For now, a simple heads up would have to do.

I heard Volkov pounding up the stairs, so I made a mad dash for the cereal box. Sticking my hand inside, I felt around until I found the hilt of the dagger. I breathed a sigh of relief and put the box back before Volkov climbed through the open window.

“Get your shit. You're not staying here.” Alpha command punctuated every word, but that wasn't what got my attention. When I looked at Volkov's face, his wolf stared out at me.

Volkov knew alpha commands were useless on me. For whatever reason, they rolled off my back like water. Maybe it

was the goat genes, but I couldn't be compelled—not by alphas, not by vampires, not even by full powered demons.

I'd never heard of anyone else with the ability to ignore compulsions. Until now. I glanced at the window. Either Dez bungled the compulsion, or I'd just found someone else who shared my ability. He wasn't a goat shifter like me though. That much I was certain of.

“Riley,” Volkov repeated. “Don't fight me on this.” Since Volkov was well aware I was compulsion proof, the fact that his voice had dropped to a growl meant the hold he had over his wolf was tenuous.

For once, I didn't test him. Eventually, the guy I ripped off would come back looking for what I'd stolen from him. The dagger would be a lot safer at Volkov's house than mine.

“Okay,” I agreed. “I'll pack a bag.”

Volkov pulled out his phone. “Do you want me to call it in?”

I forced down the panic at the thought of the human cops getting involved. “No need to call the police. Let's just get out of here.”

Volkov studied me long enough I had to fight the urge to squirm but eventually he nodded.

I went to my bedroom to throw some clothes and toiletries in a duffle bag. When I came back Volkov had stepped into the other room to make a call. Whoever he was talking to was getting an earful about the appalling lack of security at my apartment as well as a description of the man who had just given him the slip. When it became clear that it was Craig Ward on the other end of the line and not the police, I relaxed.

While Volkov was occupied, I quickly went to the kitchen and shoved the box of cereal in my bag. I grabbed the burner phone next and sent Dez the deets, along with a directive to dig up everything he could about the man I'd robbed. This guy knew who I was and where I lived. It was time to level the playing field.

Volkov was standing in the same spot where I left him. I brushed past him to the door. “Are we going, or what?” I threw over my shoulder.

At the car, Volkov slid the strap of my bag off my shoulder without ending his call. I snagged the burner phone from the side pocket before letting go. He tossed my bag in the backseat and waited for me to get in before shutting the door. Crossing my leg to block his view of the phone, I flipped it open. I glanced at Volkov. He was too absorbed in his own clipped conversation to notice what I was doing.

I shot off a quick text to Levon letting him know the photo shoot was delayed. The minute I had some time alone, I’d send him the photo. I tucked the phone back into my pocket. Then, I crossed my fingers and hoped I hadn’t just blown my chance at unloading that magical dagger before it got me killed.

CHAPTER 16



Bennie was one of the few members of the pack I knew by name. Naturally, he was the one who spotted me walking out of Volkov's master bedroom with a towel twisted around my hair and another wrapped around my body.

I'd commandeered Volkov's private bathroom for a shower so that I could test my theory. Not only did he have a bidet with heated water and a dedicated dryer for your butthole, that baby played classical music like it was an opera house. I peed twice just to get the full experience.

Bennie froze when he spotted me coming out of Volkov's bedroom. Although Bennie was a werewolf, that's where the similarities between him and Volkov ended. Bennie was as sweet as Volkov was surly. He was also occasionally my plus one to karaoke nights. Unlike the rest of our friend group, Bennie didn't mind camping out at the bar for moral support while I let my inner pop star out.

I hadn't seen much of him for the past few weeks though. Bennie worked as a police dispatcher and had been picking up a lot of overtime because they were short-staffed. He was one of many supernaturals embedded in human law enforcement agencies.

Because magic wasn't out in the open, double agents like Bennie helped route calls to our side and run interference on supernatural cases. Why reinvent the bureaucracy when they could get all the intel with little effort? There were also plenty of vamps moonlighting as memory erasers to cover up

supernatural messes and witches selling wards and spells to keep things hidden.

Bennie craned his head to look into the bedroom. “I thought the alpha was gone. Is he?” He pointed behind me.

I tucked the end of my towel in to secure it and grinned at Bennie’s obvious discomfort. “Nah. He got a call and rushed out of here like his tail was on fire.”

Bennie’s gaze darted to the bed. “Were you?” The poor guy couldn’t even form the whole question.

I considered making Bennie squirm a bit but decided to let him off the hook. “I’m just taking advantage of his shower.” I stepped closer to Bennie and lowered my voice. “Do you know it has a steam mode? And aromatherapy?”

How Volkov managed to hold on to that grumpy-ass werewolf persona when he had access to a shower like that was beyond me. If anyone should be in a perpetual bad mood, it was me. I was lucky if I had enough water pressure in my apartment to rinse the conditioner out of my hair—and forget about hot water.

“Why are you at his house?” Bennie asked.

I shrugged. “My apartment got trashed, and Volkov was there to see the aftermath. Like usual, he overreacted.”

Bennie straightened, all awkwardness gone as he shifted into crisis mode. “Are you okay?”

I waved him off. “I’m fine.” I grabbed his wrist and pulled him into Volkov’s room. “Have you seen this guy’s bathroom?”

After giving him the guided tour, I popped into the guest room long enough to change. I’d been so focused on hiding the dagger in my bag, I hadn’t paid much attention to the clothing I’d stuffed inside. A rumpled, long-sleeved t-shirt with a punk rock cat on it and a pair of baggy sweatpants were the sum total of my choices. At least I packed spare underwear and socks.

After getting dressed, I checked my reflection in the mirror and scrunched my nose. *Not a good look, Riley.* An image of the perfectly coordinated college girls who had been so enamored with Volkov at the Sundowner popped in my head, but I shut that shit right down. *What did I care if I looked like a bridge troll? I was here to lie low, not look pretty for an overbearing werewolf.*

I pulled my hair into a ponytail and joined Bennie in the kitchen.

“You hungry?” he asked.

I raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, dumb question.” He opened the doors of the industrial-sized refrigerator and pulled out leftovers. After a quick sniff test, he stuck the lasagna in the microwave to reheat.

“He sent you, didn’t he?” I poked him in the chest. “Admit it, you’re my designated babysitter.”

“Guilty as charged.” Bennie pulled the hot dish out and sat it in front of me with a fork and a glass of water.

“But he didn’t tell you why I was here?” I asked between bites.

Bennie shrugged. “The alpha isn’t exactly forthcoming with details.”

I let Bennie steal a bite before scooting the container away from him and leaning in to block any future attempts. “For someone who is all up in everyone else’s business, he sure can’t be bothered sharing important information.”

I sounded bitchy even to my own ears, but I was annoyed that Volkov kept stringing me along instead of just ponying up the P.I.’s report. It didn’t help my mood that Levon had texted me a half hour ago to say that the potential buyer had backed out, even after seeing the photos I’d sent the minute Volkov left me alone.

Bennie sighed. “He’s not that bad.”

I kept eating to prevent myself from commenting. Volkov was, after all, Bennie's alpha. When I finished, I shoved the empty dish across the counter and turned to face Bennie. To lighten the mood, I gave him a Volkov impersonation in my best Fred Flintstone voice. "You watch girl. Stop trouble."

Bennie shook his head, laughing. "That's a terrible impression." His smile slipped as he looked over my shoulder.

I spun around on my bar stool. Sure enough, Volkov was standing in the open doorway to the garage, looking even grumpier than when he'd left. I waved.

Bennie stood. "I should go."

Volkov nodded. "Thanks for covering on short notice."

When Volkov turned his attention to me, I tapped my fingernails against the granite countertop. "Isn't this where you hand the babysitter twenty bucks and offer him a ride home since it's past curfew?"

Volkov stalked past me without a word, grabbing my empty food container. After spraying it thoroughly enough it no longer needed to be washed, he put it in the dishwasher.

Bennie gave me a quick hug and a mumbled, "Don't kill each other."

"No promises," Volkov and I said at the same time. It was enough to break the budding tension.

After Bennie left, Volkov crossed his arms and leaned his head back against the refrigerator. His eyes closed, and I let myself study him. Without the tension lining his features, he looked his age. Most of the time, it was hard to remember that he was only twenty-nine, just a few years older than I was.

Even relaxed, his body was corded with the lean muscles of a fighter. He was normally clean shaven and seeing the hint of stubble against his cheeks felt intimate somehow. He was the most striking man I'd ever seen, all hard angles and intense features, save for those sinfully soft lips that I imagined doing bad, bad things. Max Volkov was everything I avoided in a man. That didn't stop the fire that coiled in my body whenever I got too close.

When I looked back at his face, his eyes were no longer closed. For a second, he studied me back, that heavy-lidded gaze skimming across my skin. He blinked and pushed himself off the refrigerator.

“Where did you run off to?” I ventured, doubting he’d give me a straight answer but needing the distraction.

“I went to your apartment,” he admitted.

I’d locked the door behind me, so I wondered how he’d gotten in. Unlike me, I highly doubted he picked locks like a petty thief. Although I was sure the man loved a good excuse to kick in a door, I didn’t think he resorted to it to get into my apartment.

He probably sweet-talked the landlady who lived on the first floor with her good-for-nothing son. Supposedly, her son handled maintenance for the complex. In reality, he spent his days adding to his pile of cigarette butts in the coffee can he kept on their small patio and listening to a.m. radio.

I ignored the how to get to the more important question. “Why did you go back to my apartment?”

“I wanted to see if I could pick up his trail.” From the downturn of his lips, that had been a fail.

“No luck?”

I crossed my fingers under the counter. I couldn’t afford for Volkov to get his hands on the guy I’d just ripped off. I’m sure the man would be more than happy to sing my praises. Volkov wouldn’t even have to apply any pressure. If he learned I took that dagger, he’d go ballistic.

“I lost his scent a few blocks away.” Volkov frowned and looked at me with narrowed eyes. “Why didn’t you want to report the break-in, Riley?”

I should have known he’d circle back and hound me about it. I shrugged. “I don’t have anything worth stealing. Calling it in would waste everyone’s time.” I licked my lips before I got a handle on my nerves, hoping he hadn’t noticed the tell. “What now?”

He came around the island to stand next to me, and I tried to ignore the kick of my pulse. “I made some calls. You’ll have new locks and a security system installed by tomorrow afternoon.”

I opened my mouth to argue because there was no way I had cash for that.

He interrupted. “It’s done.”

I swiveled to face him. “You just think you can steamroll over everyone, don’t you?”

He didn’t look the least bit apologetic. “I can.”

I stood up and took a step toward him, but he didn’t give an inch. “Did it ever occur to you to ask?”

“No. Your safety isn’t optional.”

“And you get to decide that—why?”

He leaned in. “Because I can.”

Volkov was a good five inches taller than me, and I resented having to look up at him. I thumped my middle finger against his chest. He caught my wrist and held it there.

“You’re an arrogant son of a—”

I didn’t get a chance to finish that insult because he cupped the back of my neck and pulled me to him. When his lips crashed against my mouth, I forgot everything but the press of his body and the feel of his tongue tangling with mine.

By the time he pulled back, we were both breathing heavily. I flattened my palms against his chest and widened the gap between our bodies. Neither of us broke away.

Volkov was hands down the most infuriating man I knew. But between the chase this afternoon and walking the edge of a fight every time I was near him, my blood ran hot. One glance down his body made it clear that his was as well.

I knew one thing. Whatever was heating up between us needed a release valve. *People have one night stands all the time*, I reasoned. *Normally, with people they don’t have to see again*, my rational side reminded me. Of course, as strait-laced

as Volkov was, a one-night stand would probably make it awkward enough he'd avoid me. I bit back a smile. *Win-win*. Before I could talk myself out of it, I dropped my hands to his hips and yanked him flush against me.

"Riley." He said my name like a warning, his body as still as a statue against me. "You think this is a good idea?"

"Hate sex is hot for a reason," I said, keeping my voice light despite the sudden onslaught of doubt. *Had I read him all wrong?* Based on the way he was holding himself back, I feared I'd just made a fool of myself in a way I could never come back from. Several painful seconds ticked by as I gathered the courage to look him in the eye—afraid to see that smug, indulgent smile he reserved for drunk co-eds who fangirled over him at the bar.

He let the silence stretch between us until I squared my jaw and looked up at him again. "Hate sex, huh?" Volkov's eyes flared with the kind of challenge that struck low and dirty. "Is that what you're telling yourself?"

I dodged the question. "We may as well get it out of our systems." When his lips quirked in a knowing smile, I added, "You know, like food poisoning."

Instead of killing that smile, it sharpened. Without warning, he lifted me onto the counter, and I had to grip his shoulders to steady myself. He nudged my legs open with his thighs and stepped between them.

Although he held my hips with firm hands, the kiss he gave me was light and teasing. While my pulse kicked up, his heart beat a slow and steady rhythm. He moved a hand to the small of my back, drawing me closer. Everything about Volkov's touch gentled the longer we kissed.

It was the one thing I couldn't bear.

When I pulled away, his expression shuttered. If this was my one-off, it wasn't going to be like this. I wanted to wreck him as much as I was about to wreck myself. I wanted to tunnel beneath that rigid control of his and knock something wild free.

And I knew exactly how to do it.

I tugged his perfectly pressed white shirt out of his pants and worked a couple buttons loose. I lifted a hand to his cheek. He obliged by leaning in.

“You know.” I brushed my thumb across the stubble on his jaw. “If I wanted soft and sweet, I’d be hooking up with Bennie right now.”

This time when I met his eyes, the molten amber of his wolf stared back at me. “Is that so?” His voice was hard.

“Mmmm hmmm.” I looked at the angry set of his jaw, and then I fanned the flames. “So, if we’re gonna do this, alpha.” I grabbed the edges of his dress shirt and yanked until the buttons gave, scattering across the floor. When there was nothing in my way, I trailed my fingers across his abs and traced the Adonis belt that dipped below his pants. “You’re going to have to fuck me like you mean it.”

Before I could explore more of his body, Volkov caught my hands. I wondered if I had pushed him too far—if he was about to pull back. He didn’t give me long to worry, reaching for my shirt to draw it slowly over my head. He paused before pulling it off, with my arms caught in the sleeves that were raised above me.

“That I can do,” he promised.

I clenched my thighs at the flash of his teeth. He fisted my shirt with one hand and twisted, trapping my arms in the sleeves. With his free hand, he cradled my head as he laid me out on the counter and pinned my arms above my head.

Volkov cut off my startled laugh with his mouth, any semblance of the earlier gentleness gone. This kiss was hard and hot enough to leave me panting. I squirmed against him, but he didn’t let up. When I nipped his bottom lip, he finally lifted his head.

I curled my hands and tugged them free of my sleeves. Then, I reached for his zipper. He leaned back to give me better access. I grabbed one of his wrists for leverage and pulled myself up, so I sat on the edge of the counter.

When I snagged the wallet out of his back pocket, he raised a brow but didn't object. As I suspected, Volkov was a man always prepared. With a condom in hand, I pushed his pants and black boxers down those muscular thighs. He pulled me toward him with a growl, but I hooked my heels on the bar stool behind him and drew it closer. My shove took him by surprise, and he staggered back.

I pressed my advantage, pushing him onto the sturdy bar stool with a smug smile of my own. Then, I shimmied out of my sweats, climbed on his lap, and dropped my bra to the floor.

CHAPTER 17



I woke to rumpled sheets and a quiet house. Both suited me fine. Since I left my only clothes on the kitchen floor when Volkov carried me to his bedroom for round two last night, I borrowed a gray t-shirt and navy-blue boxers. I did a quick check of the house to make sure I was alone. When I found no trace of Volkov, I grabbed the dagger from my bag and headed to his library.

Of all the rooms in Volkov's house, this was the one I had been in the most since the Tribunal used it as their de facto meeting space. Although I flew under the radar until the last year or so, I'd been dragged to far too many Tribunal meetings lately. If they never summoned me here again, it would be too soon.

The library itself was a gorgeous room, with floor-to-ceiling dark wood bookcases and a massive stone fireplace built for rainy day reading. It also served as Volkov's office. I bypassed the desk where I'd found the phone number for the Santa Fe P.I. and made my way to the bookcases.

Last night as I lay in bed listening to Volkov's even breathing as he slept, I thought about where I could stash the dagger until Levon found me a buyer. Returning it to my apartment was a no go. Renting a safe deposit box wasn't an option. Even if I had the identification needed to rent one, a bank was the last place I wanted to stash my stolen goods.

Hiding it in a house frequently teeming with werewolves? Now, that was perfect. Even if the guy I stole it from managed to figure out I'd left it here, he'd never get enough time in this

room to sort through all the potential hiding places. All I needed was a nook to hide it in—one that Volkov wouldn't inadvertently stumble across.

I crouched down until I found a fat tome tilted *A History of Lycanthropy in Eastern Europe* on a lower shelf. I pulled it out to make room. After wedging the dagger I'd wrapped in a hand towel to the back of the shelf, I replaced the book. I pulled the surrounding books forward so that it didn't stand out. *Not bad.*

The sound of a door closing spurred me into action. I grabbed a book off a high shelf and propped myself on one of the leather couches with the book open on my lap.

Although I heard Volkov enter the room, I pretended to be absorbed in my book.

"A little light reading?" he teased.

I looked down at the open pages. Of all the books in this library, leave it to me to grab a dictionary. I snapped it shut and looked up at him. "Just stocking up on scrabble words for game night."

He was shirtless, his gray sweatpants slung indecently low on his hips. I tried not to stare and failed. "Why are you dressed like that?"

His smile widened. "Because I went for a run."

"Shirtless?" I asked, forcing my gaze away from those abs.

"I tossed my shirt in the washer before coming to look for you." Volkov watched me with amusement as I put the book back without responding.

"I'll make eggs while you change," I offered. "After breakfast, we are talking about that P.I. report." I walked past him and headed for the kitchen, not waiting for his response. He'd put off this conversation long enough.

Thankfully, Volkov's refrigerator was fully stocked with breakfast staples, including thick slices of bacon. While it was cooking, I went in search of my first love. Despite devoting space in his vegetable drawer to kale and some sort of

unidentified root vegetable, there were no green chilies to be found. Having grown up in New Mexico, plain scrambled eggs were unacceptable. I searched for something to make them worth eating.

“Where’s the hot sauce?” I yelled. When Volkov didn’t answer, I dug around in the refrigerator until I spotted a brand-new bottle of hot sauce shoved to the back of the shelf. It was better than nothing.

“Found it!” When I closed the door, it wasn’t Volkov standing on the other side.

Kali’s eyes were comically wide as they took in my clothes. I heard the low rumble of men’s voices in the other room and realized she hadn’t come alone. I knew she’d travelled to Chicago with the Tribunal’s enforcer to check out the second witch murder and to visit her family, but I hadn’t expected either of them to show up here bright and early.

Before Kali could launch into twenty questions, I waved the hot sauce bottle in front of her. “Oh hey, Kali. You’re just in time for breakfast.” I shoved the bottle into her hands. “Hold this. I’ll get you a plate.”

Volkov and Craig’s conversation died when they reached the kitchen.

“What?” I asked when both Kali and Craig continued to stare between us.

Kali cleared her throat. “You and...” She pointed at Volkov.

I shook my head. “It’s not like that.”

“So, the two of you didn’t...” she mumbled.

I winked at Volkov who had gone completely rigid at Kali’s question. *Might as well own it.* “Oh, we totally did, but it’s not like we’re dating.”

Volkov’s gaze drifted down my t-shirt clad body, pausing on the tattoo of colorful jewel flowers twining up my calf. It was the first tattoo I ever got—a reminder of what I was made of and where I came from. The urn-shaped jewel flowers

looked delicate clinging to their thin stems, but they thrived in the stark canyons and harsh desert of New Mexico. They were beauty in the face of adversity, and they had been my mother's favorite flower.

Volkov's lips turned down, and he looked away.

I straightened my spine. "It's just a booty call."

At that, Volkov flushed. *Is he embarrassed at getting caught with me?* He probably hoped no one would ever find out.

"Are you blushing?" I taunted.

"I don't blush," he bit out as he turned an even darker shade of red.

I grabbed the eggs from the stove, turning my back on him. "You know, friends with benefits," I told Kali.

"We're not friends," Volkov grumbled.

I shrugged, grabbing four plates and dividing the food between them. I handed Volkov one with a sweet smile.

When Kali moved to sit on the bar stool at the end of the island, I tugged her back. "Maybe not there." I pointed to the breakfast nook instead. When Kali shot me a questioning look, I leaned close. "Turns out, he's not all lights-out missionary after all." I snagged an extra slice of bacon before joining the three of them at the table.

Kali and Craig filled Volkov in on their trip while we ate. There were enough similarities between the Chicago murder and the witch who was killed here in Kansas City that Craig was convinced they were connected. The only real clue they found was a crumpled page from a dead witch's grimoire—the same grimoire that we knew contained a demon summoning ritual. The last woman who had been in possession of the grimoire was locked up in a supernatural prison called the Compound in Romania. And the only way in was by invitation of a man named Aleksei. While the three of them bickered over whether Kali should go with them, I studied Volkov, who seemed more agitated than normal.

Kali beat me to the question on the tip of my tongue. “Who is this Aleksei, anyway?”

Volkov tensed. “My brother.”

This was the first I’d heard of Volkov having a brother—not that we’d swapped many growing up stories. “Is he the warden or something?”

“Something like that,” he said evasively.

I tipped my chair back, balancing on two legs. “Can I come?” A few days lying low in Romania sounded like a great idea, especially since my last buyer fell through, and I was stuck waiting for Levon to shop the dagger around.

“Absolutely not,” Volkov snapped.

“Why not?” I challenged. When all three of them stared at me, I balked. “What?”

Volkov pushed himself back from the table. “Because you create chaos wherever you go, and we can’t afford any distractions if we want to come back from the Compound in one piece.”

While they made plans, I put the dishes in the dishwasher. Once Kali and Craig left, Volkov disappeared into his library to make a call. If he thought dismissing me would be that easy, he had another thing coming. He’d put off our conversation long enough.

I was going to march into that library and find out exactly what was in that P.I. report he was hiding. But first, I needed to change my clothes. Something told me this wasn’t going to be a morning-after, borrowed-boxers kind of conversation.

CHAPTER 18



Not willing to let Volkov evade the conversation any longer, I positioned myself so I had a clear view of the closed library pocket doors. Based on the thunderous expression on his face when he came out, I was guessing the family reunion hadn't been a pleasant one.

He took one look at me and held up his hand. "Not now, Riley."

I crossed the room, stopping in front of him. "You're about to take off for Romania, so yeah, we're doing this right now." I stepped around him and went inside.

Despite a few muttered curses, he eventually followed. Volkov moved around his desk, unlocking the same drawer I'd broken into and found the Santa Fe phone number. He pulled out a large manila envelope and dropped it on the desk with a frown.

I sat on one of the chairs near the desk and squeezed my hands together in my lap. I had no idea what was in that envelope. Based on Volkov's hesitancy in sharing it with me, I doubted it was anything good. I reached for the envelope, but Volkov caught my hand.

His lips thinned as he stared at it. "There are some things in that report that will be a shock," he finally said.

Volkov seemed to be under the mistaken impression that I didn't know what a lowlife Carl was. *I wish.*

I just hoped whatever shocks he'd found in that report were blackmail worthy. I needed something to hold over Carl's

head when he caught up with me. At this point, I suspected it was a when, not an if.

“I can handle whatever is in that report,” I assured him.

Anticipation had me biting my cheek and bouncing my foot. It must have come across as nerves rather than anticipation because Volkov gave my hands a reassuring squeeze before letting go. I slid the envelope to my side of the desk before he changed his mind.

My hands shook as I pulled the ream of papers out of the envelope and began to read. The first few pages read like a mini biography of a budding sociopath as they outlined Carl’s early years. By the time he’d become alpha, he’d already left a trail of suspicious deaths in his wake. Other than a couple petty thefts and an arson charge when he was in his twenties though, the cops never pinned anything on him.

I skimmed until I got to the years after he became alpha. A grainy photo of Carl was paperclipped to one of the pages. He was exactly how I remembered him—from the close-cropped dark hair down to the hard eyes staring flatly at the camera lens.

“It gets worse,” Volkov warned.

He wasn’t wrong. The P.I. had done a thorough job connecting Carl to a litany of violent crimes. The burglaries were a given since those were his bread and butter. Carl not only fenced stolen goods out of his pawn shop while I lived with him, he had also sent me after all manner of inventory—magical and otherwise.

In addition to various thefts, there was a long list of other crimes, along with the dates that Carl had been pulled in for questioning. I scanned the list, noting everything from first degree murder to assault. When I looked up, Volkov was watching intently for my reaction.

“He’s a real piece of work, alright,” I said.

The crimes themselves weren’t surprising. I’d lived under Carl’s thumb for four years, so I was well acquainted with his propensity for violence. But how could he have been tied to

over a dozen crimes and yet never have been arrested? If he had cops on the payroll, why was he pulled in for questioning at all? None of that made any sense until I read the next page.

According to this report, it was common knowledge that Carl bought his way into the alpha position—first, by paying the old alpha enough to retire and second, through bribes to get his biggest competition to concede without a fight.

Although I understood the basics of pack dynamics from my stint in Carl's pack and from what I'd learned since moving here, there was a lot I didn't know. Fortunately, I was with someone who did.

"How are new alphas normally selected?" I asked.

"That depends very much on where the pack is located." Anger sparked in Volkov's eyes, and his body tensed. "In North America, tournaments are the norm."

I wondered if his anger was because he viewed Carl's power grab as cheating, or if it was because of something more personal. "And in other parts of the world?" I asked, even though it had nothing to do with Carl. Thanks to living with a crew of gossip-loving witches, I knew Volkov came to Kansas City specifically to challenge for the alpha position.

He stared at me long enough that I squirmed under the scrutiny. "In Russia," he finally said, "like in many of the older European packs, the position of alpha is hereditary as long as there is an heir dominant enough to fill the role."

I scanned the tailored fit of his clothes and the custom finishes in this room. Volkov came from money. *Had he been the younger brother of such an heir?* I wanted to ask him if he had given up his family to come here. Instead, I stayed on topic. "How do these tournaments usually work?"

"Tournaments vary by pack. Some of them are elaborate affairs with a series of mental and physical challenges that prospective alphas must master to qualify. Others, skip right to the fights." From the looks of it, the Santa Fe pack fell into the latter category.

“What was your tournament like?” I asked before I could stop myself.

Volkov looked away. “Brutal.” He turned his back to me as he poured himself a drink, but he didn’t offer any details.

“How many challengers competed for your position?”

Volkov shrugged. “Ten or so, but this pack was in disarray when I took over. It’s not unusual to have three times that number entering a tournament. Most are open tournaments, meaning they aren’t limited to existing pack members, and that’s a big draw for dominant shifters outside the pack.”

Like you, I thought, but I steered the subject back to Carl. “According to this report, Carl essentially bought the position. Is that normal?”

“No. It’s not.”

I scanned the P.I.’s notes again. Although any dominant shifter over the age of twenty-one had been eligible to enter the Santa Fe tournament, only three wolves put their names forward. I recognized two of the three. In addition to Carl who was an outsider to the pack, two existing pack members initially put their names in the tournament. Tony, who had been the beta when I was part of the pack, was one of them. Rumor had it that Carl’s two challengers conceded at the same time they both suddenly came into enough money that it drew attention.

“How would Carl get his hands on this kind of money?” I asked, trying to connect the dots.

“That’s a good question. It looks like prior to landing in Santa Fe, he was barely making ends meet.” Volkov peered down at the report. “My guess would be someone bankrolled his power grab.”

But who? Could this be something I could use against him somehow? It wasn’t exactly blackmail material, but it was the closest thing I had. I wanted to pull on this string and see what unraveled. I’d ask Dez to do some digging.

Volkov cleared his throat. “The next few pages are the police report.” He stood and walked around to my side of the

desk, glancing down at the papers I was still holding.

I looked up at him questioningly.

“It’s from the night your parents died,” he said.

The air seized in my lungs. By the time I remembered to breathe, only one question was playing on a loop in my head. “Did he start the fire that killed my parents?”

Part of me had always suspected it hadn’t been an accident. Carl had been there that night, talking to the police, and they released me into his custody despite him being a stranger. Even at twelve, I’d known that wasn’t normal, but I’d been so lost in grief for my parents I hadn’t objected.

From the lack of surprise at my question, Volkov had already considered it. “I don’t know,” he said.

I read the police report. There was no mention of Carl anywhere in it. The cause of the fire was listed as unknown. “Do you mind if I take a copy?” I asked, pulling my camera app up on my phone.

When Volkov agreed, I quickly snapped photos of the police report before flipping back to the entries about Carl’s windfall deposits and taking photos of those as well, including Carl’s bank account number. Volkov didn’t object, but he kept watching me like he expected a bigger reaction.

“I don’t understand. What am I missing?”

He pointed to a line further down the report. It listed two victims who had died in the fire—Santiago and Amelia Cruz. My throat tightened as I read my parents’ names, but it was the next sentence that delivered that shock Volkov promised. “No known survivors.”

I read it again. “Carl must have paid them off to write this,” I reasoned. “That must have been how he was able to make me go with him that night.”

I looked to Volkov for a confirmation that didn’t come. He ran a hand across the back of his neck. “I had the same thought myself, so I had the P.I. search for your records.”

I leaned toward him. “And?”

“There’s nothing, Riley. No birth certificate, no immunization records, no school records.” Volkov met my eyes. “It’s as if you don’t exist.”

Unable to sit still any longer, I jumped to my feet and paced, the report still clutched in my hands. “How can that be?”

There had to be records. Before I’d moved in with Carl, I went to the public elementary school that was walking distance from our house. Had Carl erased those records as well? Why would he go to all that trouble?

Volkov shook his head. “I don’t know, but I’ll figure it out.” He followed my pacing with his gaze, looking grim. “That’s not all. In the last month, Carl has made inquiries to at least three more alphas that I know of—all of them from the territories closest to Kansas City. Two of the three alphas agreed to allow one of his shifters to comb the area for you. He’s determined to find you. Even though I turned him away, sooner or later, he will figure out you’re here.”

I didn’t need a P.I. report to know that.

Volkov pried the papers out of my hands and sat them on his desk, the grainy photo of Carl on top. “Now, you understand why you don’t have a choice. You need to join this pack.”

I stopped pacing to stare at him. “No. I don’t.” What I needed was to get a buyer lined up ASAP, so I’d have the funds needed to run if it came down to that. I moved toward the door, but Volkov grabbed my arm to stop me.

“You can’t handle this on your own,” he argued, his grip tightening.

I shrugged his hand off my arm. “You have no idea what I can handle.”

Volkov continued as if I hadn’t spoken. “Join the pack, and he won’t be your problem.”

That was never going to happen. “And if I don’t?” I challenged, crossing my arms across my chest.

As the Kansas City alpha, this was his territory—by law and by force if necessary. I was only here because he'd allowed me to stay as an unaffiliated shifter. Most alphas would have chased me out by now, but Helen had negotiated with the new alpha on my behalf when I'd landed here at sixteen.

There weren't a lot of lone shifters because they almost always existed outside the power structure, living on the fringes of the supernatural community. That made them expendable. Volkov would be within his rights to give me an ultimatum to either join his pack or leave his territory.

He took a step closer to me. "Stop being so damn stubborn."

"You said it yourself. I'm trouble." I shoved his chest until he backed up. "Why are you so determined that I join the pack?"

"I can't keep you safe if you're out there on your own."

I softened at his words even if I did disagree with him. "I'm not your responsibility, Max."

Volkov stepped away, moving behind his desk. Even though I'd been the one to push him away, I had to battle the urge to follow.

Volkov stopped at the sideboard behind his desk and poured himself a glass of over-priced bourbon from the decanter. He threw the drink back without looking at me. "Every shifter in this city who isn't capable of protecting themselves is my responsibility."

"Wow." His words landed like a blow. "That's how you see me? Some weak kid in need of your protection?" It stung more than it should.

Instead of walking that statement back, he doubled down. "Aren't you?"

Rage lit me up like a flame to kindling, but he wasn't done.

Volkov slammed his empty glass to the desk. “You constantly stir up shit and yet, here you are. You get to be this.” He gestured toward me, his gaze sweeping from my hair to my toes. All the while, those lips that had kissed me yesterday now curled with condescension. “But you live in a fucking bubble, Riley. You can afford to be naïve and reckless because people like me stand between you and all the monsters.”

I reeled back and stared at him. “Naïve?” This man may have just seen me naked, but he had no idea who I was.

“You don’t need to worry about the kind of monsters that are out there.” He pointed at Carl’s photo laying on the desk between us. “Because I will be the fucking boogeyman to keep men like this away from you.”

I was so angry, my hands shook where they were fisted at my sides. “You’re a decade too late for that.” I glared at Carl’s photo and then at Volkov who was standing in front of me. “And this—” I echoed his earlier gesture, sweeping my hand from the top of my dyed head to the combat boots on my feet. “This is the only person who has ever kept me safe.” I shook my head. “You really don’t get it, do you? You are so wrapped up in the establishment, you can’t see past it. News flash—the monsters aren’t out there. They’re the ones running the damn show.”

Volkov stiffened, and I knew he took that to mean him. I was too angry to correct it. When you weren’t at top of the food chain, sometimes you had to hit below the belt to land a blow. And I’d fight as dirty as I had to in order to walk out of this room whole. I let an alpha make me feel small once, and I swore to myself I’d never allow it to happen again.

This time when I walked out, I didn’t look back.

CHAPTER 19



I didn't make it to the end of the driveway before Volkov caught up with me. The quick stop I made to grab my stuff had given Volkov enough time to pull his car out of his garage and intercept me. I tried to ignore the Audi idling next to me even as he rolled down the window.

"Get in," he barked.

Without glancing his way, I flipped him the bird and kept walking.

Volkov kept pace with me. "Stop being a stubborn ass and get in the car."

Arguing over something as trivial as a ride home was a waste of my time. Besides, the sooner he checked out the security system he'd had installed at my apartment, the sooner he'd be on his way. I walked around the back of the car and got in the passenger's seat, tossing my duffle bag in the backseat.

Instead of rolling up his window, Volkov leaned out and inhaled. He threw the car in park and bolted out, leaving his door open. He jogged to the tree line. Tired of listening to the annoying ding, I reached across his seat and pulled the door closed. When Volkov made it back to the car several minutes later, he was agitated and finishing a phone conversation. All I caught was the signoff.

I scanned the yard but didn't see anything. "What's going on?"

"I caught his scent on the property."

My stomach pitched. “Whose scent?” I asked, suspecting I already knew the answer.

“The same man who busted into your place.” Even though Volkov was back in the driver’s seat, he looked primed for a fight. He stared at his house through the rearview mirror.

I barely resisted the urge to sprint back into the house to retrieve the dagger. After taking a calming breath, I worked hard to keep the panic out of my voice. “Someone’s coming to check it out though, right?”

“Yes,” he said, still scanning the area. “Craig’s on his way.”

“Good.”

Even though I suspected the man had a squishy side, Craig was terrifying when he was in protector mode. Few people were stupid enough to tangle with a man who could shift into a seven-foot-tall gargoyle. Once Craig was on the property, no one would get past him into Volkov’s house. I needed to calm down. The dagger would be safe for now at least. But I needed a foolproof hiding place until I could sell it. I broke out in a sweat while I thought of all the security holes in every potential hideaway that popped into my head.

Volkov turned to me, picking up on my nerves. His gaze dropped to the sweaty palms I was wiping on my pant legs. “Riley, look at me.”

I did as he asked.

“Whoever this guy is, he won’t get near you,” he promised.

I blinked at him. It took a second for our earlier conversation to resurface. *He thinks I’m afraid of the man coming after me.* Since I couldn’t exactly tell him I was far more afraid of losing a dagger I shouldn’t even have, I nodded.

My mark might be human, but I had to hand it to the guy. He was as tenacious as any shifter, and that made him more dangerous than I had given him credit for. I needed to find out who this guy was, so I knew how to handle him.

The sight of Craig's truck coming up the driveway saved me from continuing our conversation. Volkov got out of the car, and the two men bent their heads together as they discussed the trespasser.

I was about to crack my window open to eavesdrop when the burner phone in my pocket buzzed. I pulled it out and checked the screen. The text was from Levon and served as a straight-up dopamine hit for my frayed nerves. *Got a couple bites. Gotta let it play out.*

My fingers trembled as I typed out my reply. *Getting hot here. Put a rush on it.* Two interested buyers would drive up the selling price, but I didn't have the luxury of a drawn-out bidding war. I needed to unload this dagger as soon as possible.

Levon's follow-up text had me grinding my teeth in frustration. *Not my problem. It takes as long as it takes.* If I knew anyone else I could trust as a middleman, I'd shop the dagger around. This was the part of the job Carl normally handled. Levon was the only contact I had.

While I had my phone in hand, I shot Dez a text to see if he had dug anything up about our mark yet. I got an immediate reply. *Working on it.*

I watched Volkov stalk back to the car and get in, while Craig headed to check out the house. Both Volkov and I were tangled up in our own thoughts on the drive to my place. Once there, he checked and double-checked my apartment. He reluctantly left after showing me how to key in my new security code. Ironically, the fancy security system he paid to have installed was the only thing worth stealing on the premises.

I took a quick shower before heading to Kali's place as I'd promised her earlier. She told me about her trip to Chicago with Craig but eventually turned the conversation back on me.

"What were you thinking, anyway? Sleeping with Max Volkov?"

I grabbed the throw pillow she'd just swatted me with and tucked it behind my head. "Oh, we weren't sleeping," I assured her.

Kali shook her head and laughed. "How long has this been going on?"

"Since about eight o'clock last night."

"And?" she prompted.

"And nothing. It doesn't have to be a big deal."

Kali snorted. "There isn't a chance in hell that man is capable of doing low-key casual."

I shrugged. "We'll see." To change the subject, I grabbed a map printout laying on her coffee table. "Why did you print a map of Bucharest?" Kali was headed to Romania with Craig and Volkov as soon as they could arrange the flight. It's not like they were going sight-seeing though. She was up to something.

Kali reached for an envelope under the map and shook out a key. She told me it was a key to a safe deposit box her grandmother had sent from Romania the year she was killed. Apparently, it had been sitting in Kali's childhood home all this time. I saw the determination on Kali's face when she told me she needed to see what was in that safe deposit box. Unfortunately, the company wouldn't release the contents to Kali without a will specifying she was the beneficiary—a will she didn't have.

I sat up straighter as the idea struck. "I could get it."

Kali argued that breaking into the safe deposit place was too dangerous, but it didn't take long to convince her of the merits of my idea. It did require that I share more of my history than anyone else knew.

Since coming to Kansas City, I'd kept details of my life in Santa Fe to a bare minimum, even with the people closest to me. Part of that was not wanting to dwell in a past that still had its hooks in me. But if I were honest with myself, part of it was also because I was afraid to risk the judgment of the

people who had become my family since arriving here eight years ago.

Kali already knew my parents had been killed in a house fire when I was twelve, so I didn't have to rehash going to live with Carl's pack after the fire. She even knew that Carl had been an abusive prick. What I hadn't shared with her, or with anyone else, was the extent of what I did for Carl during the four years I lived under his roof. Given the number of times I'd put my lock-picking kit to good use in her presence, I doubted Kali mistook me for a Girl Scout. I also doubted she had any inkling about the extent of my talents.

By the time I left Carl's pack, I was a world-class thief. I may not have planned the heists, but I was the one who pulled them off. Some things—no matter the time or distance—left an indelible mark.

I stood and paced to the living room window, watching the street below. "He started me with simple jobs—pickpocketing tourists, petty shoplifting. As you've seen, I have a natural aptitude for getting in and out of secure spaces," I started.

She patted the couch cushion next to her.

With a sigh, I dropped back into it, angling my body to face her. "That's not all I did for him, though."

Kali swallowed, but she didn't look away. Not when I told her about the robberies or the safe cracking, not even when I described the security evasion measures that I'd mastered in order to take on bigger, more lucrative jobs. As I told her about Carl sending me after magical artifacts, her hands balled into fists where she held them on her lap. When I told her about my last job, stealing from Damien Creed, Kali swore and punched a throw pillow.

"He sent you to steal from vampires and witches knowing it could get you killed?" she asked, her voice rising with the flush on her cheeks. "What a scumbag, sending a sixteen-year-old girl on suicide missions, so he could line his pockets." She growled.

Kali took a few steadying breaths, but not before I saw the glint of tears in her brown eyes—for me. I tried to make light of the story, but she wasn't having it. One look at her outrage over risking my life for a payday, and I tamped down the urge to come clean about my current predicament. Now wasn't the time for a full confessional—not when Carl was so close to finding me, and the guy I'd ripped off was nipping at my heels. I needed to get out of the country and lie low for a while, and I needed Kali on my side to do it. For now, I settled for a tight hug and a tentative smile as we plotted how to smuggle me past an alpha with a nose like a bloodhound.

In the end, we came up with a plan to sneak me onboard the flight Volkov chartered to Romania. The plan was simple but effective. We'd get to the downtown airport early, giving me the chance to stow away before Volkov and Craig arrived. Because there was zero chance that Volkov wouldn't be able to scent my presence, we planned for Kali to wear my leather jacket, providing a reason for my scent to be on that plane. As added security, she'd also douse herself in enough cologne to overwhelm Volkov's senses.

We figured that as long as we waited to divulge my presence until we were thirty-thousand feet in the air, Volkov would have little choice but to let me tag along for the trip. Once we landed, getting the contents of her grandmother's safe deposit box would be an easy in-and-out job for me.

All I needed now was to retrieve the dagger from Volkov's place without him spotting me. I had to safeguard that dagger until I could line up a buyer. What better place to do it than in a country halfway around the world?

CHAPTER 20



Stealing onboard the chartered plane proved even easier than I'd anticipated. After spending an uncomfortable hour in a cramped airline supply closet followed by several more hours ignoring Volkov's surliness once he knew I was onboard, I couldn't wait to get off the plane. By the time we landed, Volkov had grudgingly accepted my presence and stood next to me in the aisle waiting for the airplane door to open.

I grabbed my duffle bag, not willing to risk him reaching for it. Although I was confident he wouldn't find the dagger, I wasn't going to chance it. I'd tucked the dagger into my G.O.A.T. cosmetic bag, along with my drugstore makeup and enough cotton balls to stuff a teddy bear. Even if someone opened the bag, I hoped they'd give up long before they got to the magical artifact nestled at the bottom.

We disembarked to find a driver in a dark sedan waiting for us at the private airfield where we'd landed. Volkov apparently had enough influence that no one checked our passports, which was good since I hadn't had time to get a fake one. The driver stood next to the car with the door held open. The only thing missing was the red carpet.

Thankfully, Volkov sat up front with the driver, so I could enjoy my first glimpses of Romania without the storm cloud of his mood ruining it. The extent of my travel experience was hopping a Greyhound to Kansas City as a teen. Before that, I couldn't remember a time my parents and I left Santa Fe, much less the state. As we drove, I leaned my cheek against

the cool glass and took in every building, every tree-lined boulevard, every bustling shopping area we passed. I wanted to commit Bucharest to memory. Women like me didn't often get the chance to see the world beyond where a car could take us. I didn't want to miss a second of it.

The car eventually stopped in front of a five-story luxury apartment building. The old-world building was more beautiful for the juxtaposition of the ordinary streets around it. A uniformed doorman waited to greet us.

"Where are we?" Kali asked, looking around as wide-eyed as I felt.

Volkov scanned the street like he was anticipating an ambush. "My family keeps an apartment in Bucharest." He said it as if keeping an expensive vacation apartment in a foreign city was something ordinary.

I followed his gaze. "What are you looking for?"

"One at two o'clock," he said, and I knew he wasn't talking to me.

"Another at eight," Craig added, confirming it.

Volkov fell in step beside me. When we reached the doors, he nudged me forward with his hand on the small of my back and waited for me to enter first.

"Welcome, Mr. Volkov." Although the greeting was for Volkov, the doorman's gaze was riveted on my bright pink hair before darting to my clothes and back up again.

As I stepped inside the opulent building, I was painfully aware of my second-hand combat boots and ratty jeans. The doorman never took his eyes off me. I squared my shoulders and stared the doorman down until he looked away.

"I'll have your luggage sent right up, sir." The doorman eyed the duffle bag slung over my shoulder with a grimace.

I clutched it closer. Unlike the others, I hadn't relinquished my bag to the driver, preferring to ride with it on my lap rather than allow it to leave my sight. I wasn't going to make an exception now. My cargo was too precious to trust it to a

stuck-up doorman who—based on the slight sneer he wore whenever he looked at me—would probably assume I was smuggling drugs and search it. The doorman inclined his head stiffly and stepped aside, giving me my first unobstructed view of the entryway.

I stumbled, and Volkov grabbed my arm to keep me from face-planting right in the middle of that expensive blue carpet. Exquisite art in gilded frames hung throughout the lobby, and a massive crystal chandelier anchored the room.

Thanks to Carl, I'd spent a fair bit of time in million-dollar homes. Heists, after all, happened on a rich man's playground. But I had never seen this level of wealth outside of television. As I looked around, I realized a flat screen virtual tour was a poor representation of the real thing. Nothing in this room came from a big box store.

I glanced at Volkov's strong, tanned fingers where they still curled around my arm before looking at his face. His expression was alert as if he expected danger, but his eyes didn't linger on any of the beautiful things in this room. And why would they? To him, this was like the line of dented mailboxes in my apartment building or the tattered five-year-old Jayhawk poster taped to the wall above them.

For the first time since I met this man, I understood how wide the chasm between us was. We weren't just different. Our worlds barely even touched.

I stepped away, and he dropped his hand.

We took five flights of stairs to his family's apartment, which stretched the length of the building to take up most of the top floor. As Craig and Volkov swept the apartment with military precision to ensure it was safe, I studied the rooms I could see. The living room we stood in had cream walls with gold highlighting the architectural details. Much like the lobby, crystal chandeliers hung in the living room and dining room. Plush upholstered furniture and expensive rugs softened the space.

Kali nudged me and pointed to the ornate gold end tables. "Can you believe this place?" she muttered under her breath.

The two men were back before I could answer. While the three of them talked, I trailed my fingers along the back of royal blue chair I stood next to.

“Are we safe here?” Kali’s voice brought me back to the conversation.

“We are,” Craig assured her. He crossed to the window and peered at the busy street below. “Aleksei isn’t expecting us until morning, but the Shadows down there will have notified him of our arrival by now.”

Is that who Volkov and Craig had spotted outside? I’d never heard of these Shadows, but it was clear that whoever they were, they were tied to Aleksei and the Compound.

Volkov ended the call he’d stepped to the other side of the room to make. “As long as everyone stays inside, they won’t come for us until morning.” He looked pointedly at me.

I feigned an exaggerated yawn. “Where can I crash?”

Before I could object, Volkov picked up the bag I’d set on the floor and led the way to one of the guest bedrooms. Like much of the house, the bedroom was decorated in cream and gold. Red accents could be found in the rug, the upholstered bench at the foot of the king-sized bed, and a few throw pillows mixed among the golden ones. The room was stunning, and it was all I could do not to back out of it. I didn’t belong in a room like this.

Volkov dropped my bag on the bed. I winced as the dusty bag landed on the pristine cream comforter. He turned to me like he wanted to say something, but he stopped himself when he saw Kali behind me. From the set of his jaw, I counted myself lucky she saved me from whatever he was about to say.

Kali stepped past me to survey the room. She spun to take it all in and whistled. “Wow!”

Volkov ignored the compliment. “You’re sleeping in here, too?”

“I am,” she said.

“Good. You brought her, so you can make sure she doesn’t cause trouble.” He spoke to Kali, but he was looking at me when he said it. There was no doubt that he was still furious with me.

I didn’t relax until Volkov closed the door behind him, leaving Kali and I alone in the room. Since Kali was determined to tag along to get her grandmothers’ safe deposit box, waiting until she was occupied at the Compound was out. Tonight, it was. As long as Kali stayed outside and served as a lookout, she wouldn’t be in any actual danger of getting busted.

Besides, I had to get out of here. I couldn’t spend another minute trapped inside these gilded walls. With Volkov gone, I crossed the room and locked the door.

“Is that smart?” Kali asked. “If he tries the knob, he’s going to know something’s up.”

I stretched my stiff neck and shoulders, forcing myself to relax. “No worries. I’ll unlock it before we leave.”

Kali frowned. “How exactly are we getting out of here?”

I opened the bedroom window and peered outside. Because this bedroom was located on the side of the building and on the fifth floor, there didn’t seem to be any eyes on us. I leaned out of the window to gauge the best way to the ground.

“Fancy,” I announced. “There’s a balcony on every level.” I smiled to reassure her.

Kali peered out at the small ledge surrounded by wrought iron and paled. “I don’t know if you can call that a balcony. It seems more decorative than anything.”

I grinned. “All that matters is that it’s sturdy. It’ll be like climbing a tree.”

Kali coughed and looked down at her pretty but impractical shoes. “Do I look like I climb trees?”

“You could stay here, you know. I’ll be in and out—half an hour, tops.”

She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes, probably assuming I was exaggerating. I wasn't.

"That's not the deal," she argued. "If you go, I go."

"You'd better change those shoes then," I taunted, pointing at her flawless red pedicure and shaking my head. I grabbed my bag and pulled out an all-black outfit including a ski mask, gloves, and a utilitarian fanny pack to carry the tools of the trade.

Kali gasped in outrage.

"Really?" I laughed. "It's the fanny pack you have a problem with, not the criminal intent?"

She huffed. "I can't help it if I have standards."

Within ten minutes, we were both ready to go. I'd put in brown contacts to change my eye color in case we were spotted and hid my distinctive hair under the rolled-up ski mask. While my clothes were standard burglar fare, Kali had dressed in what looked like an assassin cosplay outfit. She wore a black cloak complete with a deep hood that dipped low over her eyes and had a cowl to pull over her mouth.

She tucked a couple knives she must have swiped from Volkov's kitchen into the pocket and added a flashlight for good measure. I briefly considered taking the dagger with me, but I knew it would be safer here.

My lips twitched as I took her in. "You look ready to kick some ass, girl," I teased her.

"No ass kicking. In and out."

I nodded. After arranging our bags under the blankets to look like bodies, I unlocked the door and headed to the window. I climbed out but spun around to face Kali. I was as sure-footed as a mountain goat even in human form, but she wasn't used to scaling down buildings.

"I'm going to drop to the balcony below," I told her. "When you come out, wait for me to give you the all-clear. Then, I want you to climb over the railing and lower yourself

from the bars. I'll grab you and pull you onto the balcony. Got it?"

When Kali nodded, biting her lip as she looked to the ground, I tried once more to get her to stay behind.

"Last chance to back out."

"No way. Let's go."

I winked at her before dropping to the balcony below. I gave Kali the go-ahead to lower herself down. She stalled for several seconds, clinging to the wrought iron bars.

"Going somewhere?" Craig's deep voice came from above us. He was perched on the roofline in his gargoyle form, massive gray wings tucked at his sides.

Busted. I considered leaving them to bicker about it while I retrieved the contents of the safe deposit box on my own. At least that way, I would escape the lecture Volkov would launch into the minute Craig took us back inside. Craig surprised me though.

Instead of insisting we climb back through the window, he plucked Kali from the side of the building. "We'll meet you there," he yelled before launching both of them into the sky.

Without Kali to worry about, I swung from balcony to balcony in a matter of minutes. I took a quick detour to a hardware store to get a pair of Channellock pliers before meeting Kali in front of the building. I tilted my head and looked at the roofline. "Craig up there?"

"Yeah. He's keeping watch."

"Good." I was glad he'd watch over her.

CHAPTER 21



Fortunately, Kali's grandmother had bypassed banks and chosen a strip-mall security place to rent her safe deposit box. That meant getting in was something I could have done when I was a teen. I pulled my ski mask down. I left Kali standing across the street, while I headed for the storefront. After a quick scan to ensure I didn't have witnesses, I gripped the round metal lock on the glass door with a pair of Channellock pliers. A quick twist, and I pulled the lock—cylinder and all—out of the opening and ducked inside.

For a business that took people's money with the promise of keeping their valuables safe, the security in this place was subpar. Other than a lone camera that looked like it had been gathering dust for ten years, there was nothing standing between me and the vault.

Skirting the camera was easy since it was aimed at the entry to the vault rather than at the front door. I approached the camera from the side and used the portable jammer I'd blown a good chunk of my tip money on. Gazing up at the antiquated security camera I'd just disabled, I mentally kicked myself. No way was that feed monitored. I should have saved my hard-earned money and stuck chewing gum on the lens instead.

Sighing, I did a quick sweep of the building before heading back to the front door and waving Kali inside. Her assassin costume billowed as she ran across the street. If I wasn't in the middle of breaking and entering, I would get a video of this. The footage would make an awesome promo for her costume shop.

Kali ducked inside, then stopped to stare at the security camera.

“No worries. I used a jammer. There won’t be any footage of us,” I assured her. “You got the box number and the key?”

“Right here.” She pulled a necklace from under her shirt with the key on it.

I grabbed the master key from behind the counter. I’d need that along with Kali’s key to open the safe deposit box. I motioned for her to follow me down the hall.

Kali swore under her breath when she spotted the vault.

She didn’t see the same thing I did. This vault was as old as the camera out front and had a mechanical lock. I grinned. Then, I rolled up my mask, peeled off one glove, and held out my hand. “Give me your phone.”

She frowned as she unlocked her phone and handed it over.

I pulled up the timer app, put ten minutes on it, and handed it back. “You’re on lookout. Hit start when you get to the front where you can see outside. Stay back far enough in the dark where you won’t be visible from the street.” I tapped the screen. “When this timer runs out, come back. I’ll be in the vault.”

She looked at the solid steel door skeptically. “You can get in there in ten minutes?”

“Seven or eight, most likely, but I’m giving myself a little buffer. It’s been a while.” I pulled a stethoscope, a folded piece of graphing paper, and a pencil out of my fanny pack. I shouldn’t actually need the stethoscope, but because it had been years since I’d attempted to break into a vault, I was playing it safe.

I pulled my glove back on and knelt by the vault door. “Now go.”

Kali went back to the main room to keep watch. As soon as she was out of sight, I cracked my knuckles and rolled my shoulders. *Just like riding a bike*, I told myself. After the

dagger stealing fiasco, I needed to prove to myself that I was more than a petty thief. *I can do this.*

I studied the vault door. Although it was a Class I door, the lock itself was pretty basic. My shifter senses gave me an edge when it came to cracking a mechanical lock like this. With my hearing, I could pick up even the faintest snick and click inside the locking mechanism as I worked it. That ability gave me a big advantage over even the best human safe crackers. Although it had taken a bit of practice as a teen, I'd quickly surpassed even Carl, who'd taught me safe cracking all those years ago. I banished all thoughts of Carl, took a steadying breath, and got to work.

It took me a full nine minutes to get into the vault. Not great, but not bad either. I chalked it up to being a little rusty. The next time would be faster. When Kali returned, I was sitting cross-legged on the table in the middle of the vault.

The only thing in the safe deposit box was an envelope. Kali waited until we'd caught up with Craig to open it. The envelope held a stack of old photographs, one of which was someone Craig recognized. Kali convinced Craig to do a little nighttime reconnaissance, and I left them to it.

I returned to the apartment alone, satisfied that I still had what it took to pull off a big job. Because whoever had eyes on Volkov's building would only be watching for people to leave, I didn't bother going in the way I left. Instead, I sauntered in through the front door, smirking at the doorman who gaped at my cat burglar outfit—rolled-up ski mask and all.

I gave him a little finger wave. As I waited for the gold-encrusted elevator, I entertained myself by singing Iggy Azalea's "Fancy" loud enough he could hear it.

When I reached Volkov's luxury apartment, I picked the lock and made my way back to the guest bedroom without incident. That night, I slid under outrageously soft Egyptian cotton sheets and slept like a baby in my old tank top and five-dollar underwear.

CHAPTER 22



Volkov was still seething about our nighttime activities when we left the apartment the next morning. I didn't like leaving the dagger unattended, but I wasn't willing to risk him seeing it and confiscating the thing. Even if I managed to sneak it past Craig and Volkov, there was no way I'd get it through prison security.

The two men had given us the run-down of what to expect, including that our morning escort wouldn't be a friendly one. I could hold my own in a fight, but anticipating a physical confrontation made me jumpy. The fact that Volkov kept me in his sights like he expected me to bolt at any minute wasn't reassuring.

To settle my nerves, I popped two pieces of cinnamon gum in my mouth as we left the building. When Volkov frowned at me, I blew a giant bubble before sucking the gum back through my teeth.

"You know, that's a bad habit," Volkov said. "Only children should chew gum."

I let my gaze drift over his perfectly pressed business suit. "Spoken like someone who has never gone without a meal."

Volkov inhaled sharply and stared at me.

Before he could say anything, I blew another bubble and turned my attention back to the street just as a white van squealed to a stop directly in front of us. Men in black tactical gear and masks jumped out of the back like a SWAT team.

Volkov jerked me close. “Don’t resist,” he warned. All trace of annoyance was gone now, and I saw real fear in his face. His grip tightened. “Riley, whatever you do, do not try to escape. They will kill you without hesitation. Do not test them.”

I’d never seen Volkov this shaken, and it made the fear curling in my belly intensify. I didn’t have time to respond because our escort took Volkov and Craig down, striking them with stun batons before binding their hands behind their backs and dropping hoods over their heads.

Despite Volkov’s warning, I was on the verge of running when Kali grabbed my hand. Her grip delayed me long enough that I didn’t stand a chance of escape when rough hands grabbed my arms. Unlike how they bound the men, they secured my hands in front of me.

My fear blotted out everything but the darkness inside the hood they shoved over my head. A punch I could take, but this? This was terrifying.

Once when I was thirteen and refused a job Carl wanted to send me on, he’d locked me in a closet for hours. He’d put duct tape across the bottom of the door, so no light would filter in. That had broken me faster than any hit he could have delivered. It had taken me years and a lot of self-directed exposure therapy to get over my fear of tight spaces. That experience taught me an important lesson though. The anticipation of what was to come proved a far more powerful motivator than any physical blow. I’d hoped to never experience those kind of head games again.

I was lifted off my feet and slammed down on a bench seat, the impact jarring me out of the fear I’d fallen into. The man pinned my shoulder to the seat and leaned over me. “Same goes for you, pink. Keep your mouth shut if you want to live.” His voice was heavily accented, and it pricked something in my memory that I couldn’t quite grasp.

“Big man, hiding behind a mask,” I taunted because the only thing worse than the fear coursing through me was letting this SOB see it.

Volkov swore at the same time that the man turned the stun baton on me. My whole body locked up as the electricity surged through me. I clenched my jaw at the pain wracking my body.

“I can do this all day long, sweetheart,” my captor promised.

I didn't give him another excuse to use it on me. I leaned my head against the seat. Then, I remembered why the man's accent struck a memory. It was something the man I stole the dagger from had said. When I'd told him I hadn't come alone, he'd said, “Let me guess. Armed mercenaries with Eastern European accents?” *Could the men who came for us be the same ones he mentioned? And how would a human get mixed up with people like this?* The questions gave me something to focus on other than my fear.

After a long, winding ride, the van stopped. We were shoved out of the vehicle and marched inside what I presumed was the Compound. I was jerked to a halt. The sounds of flesh hitting flesh told me we were in some type of training yard. Gun shots periodically punctuated the combat training going on around us. Our escort wasn't in a hurry to take off the hoods or remove our restraints, so we stood there for several minutes before Volkov's patience ran out.

“Is there a point to this?” Volkov asked, his voice sounding bored. “Because if you're trying to intimidate us with your weapons demo, you're going to have to try harder.”

A man chuckled. “I'm surprised you recognize the sounds of combat, Maxim. I was afraid you'd grown soft looking after your little flock.” The man who spoke had a deep, cultured voice different from the men who had grabbed us. From the familiarity in his taunts, I assumed this must be Volkov's brother Aleksei.

“Practice and combat are two different things, brother. Something you would recognize if you didn't waste your life between these walls serving your handlers.”

I knew neither man would back down. Since I'd had enough of this hood, I decided to jump in before it devolved

into a bickering match. “If we’re done measuring our dicks, can we get on with it? Because I really need to pee.”

Aleksei laughed even as his brother swore. “Who do we have here?” Aleksei asked as he removed my hood. Surprise was evident on his face as he took in the shock of pink hair that tumbled free from the hood. He whistled. “Well, well, aren’t you a surprise? You hardly seem like the kind of company my brother keeps.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

There was a polish to Aleksei that had nothing to do with his Armani suit. He wore a veneer of civility and sophistication his brother lacked. But the family resemblance was clear in the strong jaw and dark hair. I’d gotten good over the years at reading people, and despite the perfectly styled hair and easy smile, I knew Aleksei was every bit as dangerous as his brother. The difference was that Max Volkov never bothered to disguise it.

“Leave her alone, Aleksei,” Volkov warned.

Aleksei smiled. “Take them off,” he directed his men, nodding toward the others’ hoods.

I ignored both men as I took in my surroundings, scanning for potential escape routes. There were none. We were in some kind of courtyard bordered on all sides by two stories of stone. Armed guards patrolled the roofline behind coiled barbed wire barriers. In the yard, dozens of men and women trained with everything from fists to an assortment of weapons.

Aleksei extended his arms to encompass the courtyard. “Welcome to the Compound.” He turned to Kali. “You must be the necromancer.”

She tipped her chin up, any fear she felt buried deep enough only people who knew her well would see it. “I am.”

Thatagirl.

After greeting Craig, Aleksei turned his attention back to me. When Aleksei stepped behind me and bent his head to my neck to inhale, his brother stiffened with anger. Even though I

wasn't part of his pack, it was obvious Volkov saw me as his to protect.

“Hmmm, not a wolf, then. What kind of shifter are you?” Aleksei asked.

I turned my head to meet his eyes. “The kind who thinks bullshit power trips are a waste of time.” I raised my hands and quickly brought them down again, slamming my secured wrists against my stomach and snapping the zip tie in two. I handed it to Aleksei with a smile.

This time, his smile back was genuine. He nodded for his men to remove everyone else's restraints. With the exception of Kali, the bindings were only effective because we cooperated. There was no way a simple zip tie could hold either Craig or Volkov unless they allowed it.

“Come.” Aleksei led us past a set of steel doors and into the building.

Once inside, we were flanked by guards. Two of them headed to the right on Aleksei's command. “If you'll follow your escorts, they'll show you to your accommodations for the duration of the interview.”

I snorted. He sounded like a flight attendant. Humor glinted in his eyes before he was back to business. “You're with us,” he directed Kali.

She caught my eye and gave me a slight nod to let me know she was okay going with them. Craig looked like he was preparing to launch himself at the two guards at her side, so I nudged him with my elbow. “She's got this,” I whispered. Reluctantly, he watched her walk down the hall and disappear around the corner.

Our guards, who made sure to flash their fangs at the first opportunity like B movie vampires, escorted us to a large break room and locked the door behind us. It was weird to be in a super-secret prison with a room that looked like every corporate break room I'd ever seen on T.V. From the overpriced vending machines to the industrial-sized coffee pot

on the counter, there was nothing distinctive in here, unless you counted the locked reinforced door and lack of fire exit.

Volkov poured a cup of coffee and forced it into Craig's hands. Although he took it, he continued pacing the room. I chose a chair in the corner and sat down, tucking my legs beneath me. I was surprised when Volkov pulled a matching chair close to mine and sat beside me.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Peachy."

He offered me one of the two cups of coffee he held. I declined. As a goat shifter, I was high-strung enough. Caffeine and I were a bad combo. We sat in silence for a long time, but Volkov never relaxed.

I broke first, unable to stand the uncomfortable silence. "This isn't a simple prison, is it?"

Volkov finished his coffee and switched the empty cup out for the one he'd brought me. "No. It's not." He took another sip. "It is a prison," he assured me. "But it's also a training facility."

"For Shadows?" I guessed.

He nodded but didn't elaborate.

"Are these Shadows mercenaries?" I asked, recalling the dagger owner's comment about mercenaries with Eastern European accents.

"No." Volkov sat his cup on the table beside him. "At least, they're not supposed to be."

"Then what are they supposed to be?"

Volkov scowled. "Spies, assassins, whatever the Enclave needs them to be." A note of bitterness tinged his voice. He stood and crossed the room, leaving me sitting alone.

By the time Kali and Aleksei came back, I was pacing alongside Craig.

Aleksei checked his watch as he entered the room. "Your transportation is running behind. They should return within the

hour. Until then..."

"We're fine here," Volkov interrupted.

"No tour, then?" Aleksei mocked.

A vein throbbed in Volkov's forehead. "I've seen all I care to see of this place."

"You didn't always feel that way." Aleksei didn't give him a chance to respond. Instead, he asked Craig to join him in the hall.

Unable to stand the thought of sitting here for an hour wondering what Aleksei meant by his last comment, I asked Volkov. "What did he mean about you not always feeling that way?"

He wouldn't meet my eyes. "When I was younger, I trained here."

"Trained for what?" I pushed.

His wolf surfaced, and his voice was rough when he answered. "Whatever they wanted."

Seeing that I was not going to leave it alone, he pointed to the chairs in the corner and followed me to sit down.

"How long did you train here, Max?"

At the use of his first name, he looked at me. He was quiet so long, I didn't think he'd tell me. "Four years."

"Just trained?" I turned in my chair to face him.

"No." He reached for the cold coffee he'd left on the table earlier and downed it.

I worked out the math in my head. Volkov was twenty-nine, and he'd taken over as alpha of the Kansas City pack shortly before I moved there eight years ago. I touched his hand to get his attention. "But you would've been seventeen when you came here. They train children?"

I didn't know why the idea shocked me, given my own history, but it did. Volkov came from money. The vacation apartment in Bucharest was testament to that. How did a rich

kid wind up in a den of assassins and spies before graduating high school?

“I was the exception.” He crumpled the Styrofoam cup in his hand and tossed it into the nearest trashcan. “My father made arrangements for me to serve ten years as a Shadow.”

I may have had some shitty breaks in my life, but my parents had loved me fiercely. As long as there was breath in their lungs, they would have shielded me from harm. So, I couldn’t grasp how someone sent their child to a place like this. I squeezed Volkov’s hand hard enough he looked at me.

“What does your father do to have that kind of sway with the Enclave?”

“The only thing my father does is take up space,” Volkov sneered. “But he has the money and power to make people look the other way.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because he saw me as a threat.”

I thought back to our conversations about how alphas were selected. “Is he the alpha?”

He nodded curtly.

“And you were the heir to his position? In Russia?” I surmised. I’d heard that he had been born in Russia but moved to the U.S. later.

“I was. My mother moved us to the U.S. when Aleksei and I were young. My father let us go on the condition we returned to Russia when we turned sixteen. A year under his roof was enough for him to ship me off to the Compound.” Volkov stared at the wall.

“I can’t believe he sent you here for ten years.” I glanced around the windowless concrete room. I knew what it felt like to be trapped, and my heart hurt for him. “But you got out?”

Volkov’s jaw tightened. “I did.”

“And Aleksei?” I asked, wondering if he had been sent here at seventeen as well. I couldn’t imagine the man sitting

next to me walking out of this place and leaving his younger brother behind.

Volkov's whole body stiffened. "Aleksei chose to stay."

Suddenly, the subtext of their barbs made more sense. I didn't get a chance to ask any more questions though because the door opened, and Aleksei walked in. Volkov pulled his hand back into his lap and stood up, his expression changing in an instant.

Aleksei gave him a wide berth. Everyone in the room tensed in the face of Volkov's barely leashed rage. I watched him stalk out of the door, looking every Compound guard in the eye as if he hoped for a challenge. A day ago, I would have believed that anger he wore so easily. I would have seen it as more proof that alphas were all the same.

But now that I knew what this place had been for him, I recognized the armor for what it was. Volkov and I might come from different worlds, but we'd both do whatever was necessary to make sure no one ever shoved us back in our cages.

CHAPTER 23



The week after we returned from Romania was quiet—too quiet after that clusterfuck of a trip. Although we came back with the contents of the safe deposit box, that was the only thing that had gone according to plan.

Volkov barely spoke after his family reunion with Aleksei. Kali’s interview with the witch had been a bust, so they were no closer to finding the witch killer than when we left Kansas City. Just when everyone had started to breathe easier, we were separated from Kali at the airport. Thankfully, despite a terrifying car ride with a vampire, she was fine.

After a rollercoaster trip like that, it was hard to trust the quiet that followed—especially when I was still holding onto a dagger valuable enough people would kill to get their hands on it. I could escape a lot of things. A bullet to the head wasn’t one of them. I’d nudged Levon a couple times since we returned from Romania, but he hadn’t responded. While our trans-Atlantic trip bought me a brief reprieve, now that I was back in Kansas City, I grew more anxious by the day.

More than once I felt the hair-prickle awareness telling me someone was watching when I left my apartment. Even though I couldn’t spot anything out of the ordinary when I checked, I couldn’t shake the feeling. I wasn’t stupid enough to dismiss it as a figment of an over-active imagination like a human might. My instincts were what had kept me alive this long.

I was sure someone was watching me. What I didn’t know was who. *Was it the dagger owner shadowing me or one of Carl’s goons?* Either way, it wasn’t good.

Because I had yet to come up with a viable long-term hiding place, I kept the dagger on me at all times. I'd retrofitted my beloved leather jacket with a built-in knife sheath by slicing a hole through the lining and adding a reinforced leather pocket. It wasn't pretty since I was no seamstress, but asking one of my talented friends to make it would have led to questions I didn't want to answer. Besides, it was functional and undetectable to anyone but me.

When I woke up to a text alert a week and a half after returning from Romania, I scrambled for my phone. I had several missed messages. The first was a disappointing text from Levon. *First is a no go. Second undecided. Still shopping it around. B in touch.* The second was a voicemail from Dez saying he'd spent some time digging into our small-town seller and had info to share in person. I texted him to come by my apartment.

The following night, Dez showed up twenty minutes late, but it was hard to stay annoyed at someone who brought you cheesecake. "Chocolate?" I asked, peeking at the container.

Dez held it in front of my nose. "Better. Chocolate raspberry."

"I forgive you." I held my hands out expectantly.

He handed over the container with a chuckle. I got us each a fork and a drink. Because I didn't have room for a kitchen table, we sat on the futon and ate ourselves into a sugar coma.

When we were down to crumbs, Dez turned serious. "Do you want the bad news or the bad news?"

"I don't think that's how the saying goes."

He shrugged. "That's all I've got."

"Fine. Hit me."

Dez booted up his laptop and showed me a photograph of a familiar face.

I sat up straighter. "That's our mark all right. Who is he?" Although he was clean-shaven in the photo, I'd been close enough to recognize him despite the missing wild man beard.

Dez tapped the screen. “Wade Mitchell. Goes by Nash.”

“And?” I prompted. “Are you about to tell me he’s a powerful witch?” I joked, remembering the silly pentagram the man had chalked on his floor.

“Nope. One hundred percent human,” Dez said.

I relaxed. “If he’s just an average human, then he can’t be much of a threat.”

Dez scowled. “There’s nothing average about Nash Mitchell.” He pulled up another document that had classified stamped all over it.

I leaned forward and whistled. “Did you just hack into government files?”

“You say that as if hacking into government files is difficult,” Dez scoffed, but I noticed the slight flush on his cheeks. He was proud of himself, whether he admitted it to me or not. He looked back at the file. “He’s ex-special forces—green beret.”

That explained the jaunty little hat on his tattoo skeleton and his ability to lay a vampire out on his back. “Okay,” I conceded. “That could be bad news.”

Dez gawked at me. “Could be? That’s most definitely bad news, Riley. The man is a trained killer.”

“We’re surrounded by trained killers.” Okay, maybe I was exaggerating, but not by much. Before Dez could launch into all the ways this man was dangerous, I peered at the report. “You said ex-green beret. Aren’t those guys lifers?”

The only thing I knew about the human military was what I learned from movies, but I reasoned that anyone hardcore enough to make it in the special forces probably wasn’t a quitter. I tried not to think about what that kind of tenacity meant for the thief who tied him to a chair and stole his dagger.

“That’s where it gets interesting.” Dez leaned closer. “Apparently, he was forced into a medical discharge six years

ago. He gets one hundred percent V.A. disability benefits now.”

I scrunched my face. “For what?” The man who attacked us seemed to be in top fighting shape to me.

Dez didn’t answer right away because he was frowning at my old lava lamp that was flickering. “What’s wrong with that?”

“I found it in a dumpster. Isn’t it great? It’s just a little temperamental.” I got up and shook the lamp. “What kind of medical discharge?” I repeated when Dez continued to frown at my now functional lamp.

“Tinnitus.”

When I looked at him blankly, he explained. “It’s an inner ear condition, makes you hear ringing in your ears.”

I slapped my forehead. “That’s why your compulsion didn’t work on him. The ringing somehow disrupted it.”

“Makes sense,” Dez agreed.

When my lamp flickered again, Dez beat me to it. Instead of shaking it like I had, he tilted it and stared at the back. I was about to tell him to unplug it since it was obviously irritating him, but he held a finger up to his lips. He set it back down gently and moved to the kitchen.

“I need a drink. Do you have any of that tequila left?”

In all the times I’d served him, Dez had never once asked for anything other than a Bloody Mary, but before I could question his sudden desire for tequila, he shook his head.

“Um, sure,” I said instead. I headed to the kitchen cabinet where I’d stashed the half empty bottle.

Dez followed me. While I got the bottle down and looked for my shot glasses, Dez grabbed a scrap of paper and a pen to scribble something down. I stopped what I was doing to watch him curiously. He held up the paper for me to read. *Someone bugged your house.*

I widened my eyes. *What the actual fuck?* I snatched the pen out of his hand and wrote Nash's name on the paper with a question mark. I hoped my guess was right, and it was Nash.

The alternative was that Carl had already found me and was keeping tabs or that Volkov had my apartment bugged when he had the security system put in. I didn't want to entertain either option. Nash made more sense though. Neither alpha had the temperament for surveillance. Plus, Nash had the motive and the opportunity since he'd recently ransacked my apartment.

Dez nodded and wrote something else on the paper—*make up a lie*.

I splashed tequila in the shot glass and handed it to him before following him back to the living room.

"Thanks." Dez set the shot glass on the coffee table untouched. "So where is the dagger? I know you moved it after Mitchell tossed your apartment."

"I rented a safe deposit box from that place over on Metcalf," I lied, making sure to speak loud enough for the listening device to pick up my answer.

"Smart." Dez stared at the lamp for a moment and then grabbed his cell phone.

He lifted his finger and twirled it in the air, which I assumed meant for me to keep talking. I looked over his shoulder to see he was downloading some kind of spy app.

"I should have a buyer soon, so we won't have to worry about this guy much longer. In the meantime, we should both keep a low profile." I peeked at his progress bar and saw that the app was almost downloaded. "Anyway, what will you do with your cut? I'm planning on blowing mine on mimosas and tango lessons somewhere with a tropical breeze."

"Hmmm. I don't know." Dez opened the app and checked the room with it. At my quizzical look, he mouthed, "Checking for cameras."

I nodded. "Maybe you could invest in a mobile blood bank," I joked.

Dez's eyes lit up with interest. "That's a good idea, actually." He lowered his phone and shook his head, assuring me that Nash didn't have eyes on us.

It still made my skin crawl to think Nash had been listening to me all this time without my knowledge. I tried to recall all the conversations I'd had here after the break-in. My shoulders slumped when I recalled Volkov walking me through the brand spanking new security system, including reciting the code.

Dez picked up his shot glass and clinked it down on the table loud enough the bug would pick up the sound. "I've got an early morning, and I've got some errands to run before going home." He stood up. "Lie low, and call if you need me."

"Will do." I grabbed my leather jacket. "I'll walk out with you. I've got a hot date with a werewolf tonight."

I had no such thing, but the thought of staying in my apartment with an active bug made me twitchy. Dez raised his eyebrows but didn't comment as we headed out.

When we were on the landing with the door firmly shut behind us, Dez pulled up the file he started on Mitchell and emailed it to me. "Everything I found is in there. Watch your back. Human or not, this guy is dangerous."

I nodded.

"And whatever you do, find a new hiding place for that dagger." He patted the left side of my jacket, proving that my secret sheath wasn't as undetectable as I thought.

"On it." I grabbed his arm when he turned to leave. "I was hoping you could look into something else for me."

"About Nash Mitchell?"

"No. This one is personal." With Mitchell hot on our tails and Carl nosing around, my get-out-of-town timeline was closing in on me. Dez was my best shot at getting more information about my background. I gave him the short version, telling him about my parents' suspicious deaths and the police report, including my theory that Carl somehow erased any local records of me. "Can you do some digging to

see if you can find my birth certificate or social security number? Something that proves I exist?"

"Of course." Dez reached out and squeezed my shoulder.

I didn't follow Dez down the stairs. Instead, I popped back into my apartment long enough to reprogram the security system with a new code. Then, I headed to Kali's place to crash for the night. I'd figure out what to do with the dagger that was weighing me down in the morning. Tonight, I need a friendly face and a bug-free zone.

CHAPTER 24



After working in dive bars for years, there were two things I knew for certain. One, the only time the bathrooms got a deep clean was after failing a health inspection. And two, no one paid fifty cents for a two-inch thick maxi pad unless they were desperate. Those two things were what brought me to the Sundowner on a Friday night.

The place was packed with familiar faces by the time I arrived. Other than a quick double-take when he spotted me coming in the door, Volkov ignored me. That suited me just fine.

I made my way to the empty bar stool Dez was saving for me after I texted him to meet me. It felt weird to sit on the drinking side of the bar for a change, but I needed to make this look like I was just here for a drink.

Thankfully, Hopper was nowhere in sight. The bartender was a werewolf I'd seen around but didn't know.

"What'll it be sweetheart?" His flirty smile slipped when he caught Volkov's dark look.

"Give me a Boulevard—bottle." I didn't want anything to drink, but I could nurse a beer for the twenty minutes or so I needed to kill before heading to the bathroom.

Dez and I passed the time playing our favorite predict-the-drink game. My heart wasn't in it, so I ended up handing Dez a twenty with a grumble. Because Volkov's table was directly in line with the women's bathroom, I couldn't avoid him without making it obvious. He watched me walk toward him

but, surprisingly, made no move to intercept me. Even though that was for the best, I couldn't help the flicker of disappointment.

The Sundowner's bathrooms were both single stall with classy signs labeling them as Dicks and Dames. The women's bathroom was occupied. Normally, I'd use the open men's bathroom, but tonight, I waited my turn. Once inside, I locked the door behind me and turned on the water. I doubted anyone could hear over the music and conversation blaring through the bar, but I liked the added insurance.

Picking the lock on the maxi pad dispenser was ridiculously easy. I opened the door and noted that the vending machine was stuffed nearly full. *Perfect*. I took the dagger out of the inside pocket of my leather jacket along with a small roll of black electrical tape. I took a few of the cheap boxed pads out of the top and taped the dagger inside. It left plenty of room for five pads to be dispensed before running out. After I locked everything back up, I headed back to the bar.

I was so pleased with myself for thinking of a hiding place Nash Mitchell would never think to look that I walked straight into the man standing in front of the women's bathroom door.

"Sorry," I mumbled when two strong hands gripped my arms to steady me. When I looked up, all the blood drained from my face. I tried to pull away, but the man's grip tightened.

"Not so fast, kid. We've got some catching up to do." The man smiled, but he let his eyes flash to his wolf in warning.

When the wolf receded, his eyes were a deep, soulful brown that glinted with amusement as he watched my reaction. It had been eight years since I'd seen Mateo, and the years had been kind to him. He'd been barely more than a kid himself when I'd known him in Santa Fe. Back then, Mateo still had some of the gangly build of his teens. Now, he was a grown man packed with muscle. If I'd met this man at the bar tonight, I'd probably find him attractive. But I knew behind that easy smile, he was still one of Carl's lackeys.

“Nice hair.” He smirked, holding me away from him so his eyes could trail down my body. “I hardly recognized you.”

Fear clogged my throat as I scanned the bar for more of Carl’s wolves.

Mateo leaned close. “Relax. It’s just you and me getting reacquainted—for now.”

I finally found my voice. “Let go,” I growled.

Mateo let go briefly, but when I moved to step past him, he dropped a heavy arm across my shoulders and steered me toward an open booth. I prepared to yell Volkov’s name, knowing even a grown Mateo wouldn’t stand a chance against the Kansas City alpha, but Mateo stopped me. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

He shoved his cell phone in front of my face. The words died in my throat. On the screen was a picture of a smiling werewolf I recognized from Carl’s pack. He was posing in front of the colorful house I’d once called home. The curtains were open, and Helen stood framed in the living room window peering outside.

I let Mateo manhandle me into the booth, not chancing a look at anyone else. “What do you want?”

Instead of sliding into the seat across from me, Mateo sat beside me and draped an arm across my shoulders as if we were lovers. I gritted my teeth and thought of the last time we’d been in close proximity. I dropped my gaze to his lap. He’d grabbed me then, too, but I’d repaid him with a hard kick to the balls that had made him cry like a baby. He must have been replaying the same memory because there was no amusement in his eyes now.

“How did you find me?” I asked.

“Your guard dog over there,” Mateo taunted, looking in Volkov’s direction.

No way. I didn’t believe for a second that Volkov sold me out to Carl. “You’re full of shit.”

“You should watch how you talk to me, kid.” Mateo’s easy smile slipped, showing me the killer behind it. “No one sticks their nose in Carl’s business without him finding out about it. Your boy over there was stupid enough to hire an overeager P.I. who made inquiries at the police department.”

I should’ve seen that complication coming. It was obvious from the P.I. report that Carl had cops on his payroll.

Mateo brushed his hand against my arm, smiling when I shrank from his touch. “Carl wants what you stole from him.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I kept my expression flat. “I don’t have anything of Carl’s.” That much was true. I’d left the stolen artifact in Santa Fe when I ran—not that Carl would believe it.

Before Mateo could respond, Max Volkov slid into the seat across from us. Mateo held his gaze for a second but soon dropped it to the buttons of Volkov’s shirt.

“Who’s your friend?” Volkov asked. He was watching me now, so I forced a smile.

“Just passing through and wanted to catch up with my girl here.” Mateo gave my shoulder a hard squeeze and sat his phone on the table between us, the warning clear.

“This is Mateo.” His fingers caressed my shoulder drawing Volkov’s attention. “Mateo, this is Max Volkov, the local alpha.”

Mateo extended his free hand, which Volkov ignored. Mateo smiled and turned his head toward me, dropping his voice to a husky whisper that said we were anything but friends. “How nice that he watches over you, even when you’re not part of his pack.”

How would he know that? Suddenly, the constant feeling of being watched made sense. Mateo must have been here awhile, tracking me and asking questions. I’d assumed the shifter I’d scented prowling around my apartment had been one of Volkov’s wolves watching out for me. I should have asked.

Volkov stiffened, anger tightening his jaw.

I jumped in to diffuse the situation. Helen's safety was too important to me to risk. "Yes. It is. But as he can see, I'm—" I was about to say fine, but Mateo cut in.

"On a date."

I couldn't quite hide my surprise. When Volkov smiled at Mateo, I knew he'd picked up on it.

Dez saved us all. "Time's up, Cruz. Your ride is leaving."

I expected Mateo to object. Instead, he scooted out of the booth and stood before offering me a hand I didn't dare refuse. He pulled me to my feet. "I'll walk you out."

Dez led the way, pausing to look over his shoulder to check that I was still following.

When we approached the door, Mateo bent his head to mine. "Carl sends his regards. He says he'll be seeing you soon." He looked back at the booth we just vacated, where Volkov remained watching us. "Your lap dog won't be able to protect you forever. Keep your mouth shut, and those old witches won't get hurt." Mateo stepped aside. "After you."

I followed Dez on shaky legs. When we reached Dez's car, I yanked open the passenger door and climbed inside as fast as I could. Before I could shut the door, Mateo's grabbed it. For a change, I was thankful for Dez's tiny car that had no room for a backseat Mateo could force his way into.

Mateo smiled as if he knew what I was thinking and then grabbed my seatbelt. "Wouldn't want something to happen to you before Carl had a chance to say hello." He pulled it across my body, leaning in to fasten it. He let his hand drop to the seat next to my leg. "I'll be seeing you, kid." Mateo closed the door. I watched him climb into a dark red pickup, memorizing the plate number as he pulled out of the lot.

Dez started the car but then turned to me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay." *For now.* I closed my eyes and slumped in the seat.

With Mateo here, Carl wouldn't be far behind. Carl may not be brave enough to waltz into another alpha's territory,

especially one as cutthroat as Volkov was reported to be. That didn't mean he wouldn't send hired guns after me. He'd already sent one of his goons into Kansas City to scout for him. How long did I have before he sent more?

The fact that he sent Mateo with a warning rather than a kill order didn't mean Carl wasn't coming for me. It meant he still wanted the stone he'd sent me after eight years ago. It also meant he wanted to turn me back into that scared girl he took in all those years ago before he came after me himself. No way was I going to let that happen. On the plus side, it meant Carl was going to drag terrorizing me out. And the time his games would buy me was something I very much needed right now.

Dez broke my train of thought. "Are you going to tell me what's going on?"

"I'll tell you on the way. I need you to drive by Helen's house to make sure she's okay before taking me home." My first priority was making sure Helen and the girls were okay. Then, I'd worry about saving my own ass.

Dez didn't argue. Glancing in the side mirror, I saw Volkov push through the bar's back door, but he was too late to catch us. Dez was already pulling out of the parking lot.

On the drive, I explained the run-in with Mateo before giving Dez the short version of my life with Carl, including my great escape. By the time we pulled onto Helen's street, he was more or less up to speed.

The curtains parted as we drove by, and Helen's face peeked out. She had a habit of traffic watching with the lights off. She was convinced no one could see her as long as the house was dark. Complete bunk, of course, but we all humored her.

"Do you want me to stop?" Dez asked.

"No. It's late. I just needed to know she was okay." I couldn't be sure that Mateo or his buddy weren't hanging around. I'd call Helen as soon as I got home and warn her to keep an eye out. But I wouldn't have been able to sleep without seeing that she was okay for myself.

On the way to my apartment, Dez gave me another bit of bad news. “About that personal matter. I did some digging, and I couldn’t find any documents for you. If Carl erased your birth certificate and social security number, he did a good job. I couldn’t find a paper trail of any kind.”

I slumped. That wasn’t what I’d hoped to hear. “Thanks for looking into it.”

As I was about to open my door, Dez stopped me. “You sure you don’t want me to stick around?” Dez offered, nudging his glasses back up his nose.

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m good.”

“Text me when you’re safe inside,” he insisted.

After checking my apartment, I sent Dez the all-clear text. Then, I climbed out the window onto the fire escape to call Helen, unwilling to give Nash Mitchell any more ammo. I kept my warning vague but promised I’d come over soon with a full explanation. I’d never confided just how much trouble I’d dug myself into back in Santa Fe, but I knew it was time.

In true Helen style, she took the threat in stride, swearing she had a special surprise in store for any wolf dumb enough to come after her or the girls. I hoped she was right because I couldn’t bear the thought of someone hurting the prickly old witch to get to me.

CHAPTER 25



A couple days later, my phone lit up with a text. It was from Levon, and for once, it was good news. *It's a go. Half mil. Final offer.*

The dagger was worth more. I was sure of it. Even so, half a million dollars was more money than I thought I'd see in my lifetime. My cut would be more than enough money to allow me to disappear if need be or to hire a P.I. of my own to dig up dirt on Carl. Either way, that money would be my salvation. I texted back an affirmation.

I didn't have to wait long for Levon's response. *One week. Coordinates TBD.* One week was a long time to guard a golden ticket worth half a million dollars, especially with Carl breathing down my neck.

With only days until I had to leave town to meet the buyer, I couldn't put off my conversation with Helen any longer. I owed her all the facts so that she'd be able to protect herself and the girls. That afternoon, I took a ride share to Helen's place. Helen lived a few blocks from Brookside Park in a 1905 tangerine orange house she'd renovated into a duplex. Helen lived in one side, and Bea lived in the other.

When I came to Kansas City as a teen runaway, Helen had taken me in no questions asked. Tonight, I stood outside her house for a few minutes, peering up at the narrow third floor. It was just big enough for the small bedroom that had been mine for the three years I'd lived here.

The side door was locked, so I used my key to let myself in. “It’s just me,” I called out as I opened the door.

“In here,” Helen yelled from the living room.

All four of my favorite witches were camped out on the living room furniture playing a game of spoons. The card game was a house favorite, although they’d adapted it. Everyone was dealt four cards, with each player taking a turn to draw and discard a card. Once someone announced a four-of-a-kind, everyone scrambled to get one of the spoons on the coffee table. There was always one less spoon than players, and whoever failed to grab a spoon was out.

It was the kind of game that easily devolved into a living room brawl. When I played, they settled for the standard version of the game to even the odds. If I wasn’t playing, things got particularly vicious because Helen and the girls played the adapted version, meaning they resorted to magical slap downs and flash bombs to win.

When she spotted me, Helen patted the couch cushion beside her. “Come sit by me, hon. You can help me cheat.”

Bea fluffed her dyed blonde hair and mumbled something under her breath. I assumed that meant she was losing. I patted her knee and pointed to her shirt to distract her. “New shirt?” She was wearing a tiger striped V-neck that had “meow” written in rhinestones across the bust. Bea and I both had a thing for catchy sayings on t-shirts. Hers trended toward raunchy while I leaned into my inner anarchist and love of old music for my wardrobe choices.

Before I could so much as say hello to the others, Alyce shouted four-of-a-kind. She slapped her cards on the table and dove for the closest spoon. That left two spoons and three witches.

Janis’ lips moved first, casting an illusion spell that replaced the remaining spoons with a mass of hissing snakes. She smiled at Bea, who harbored a healthy fear of vipers. Not to be outdone, Bea flicked her wrist while chanting a simple incantation that made flames dance across the tabletop. Since the wood didn’t smoke, the flames were as much an illusion as

the vipers slithering among them. Both witches were adept at crafting illusion spells that not only looked real but also felt real. Whoever reached for the spoon would get a dozen nasty snake bites and feel the burn of the flames on their skin.

Out of the witches, Helen was the one to watch out for though. I loved her fiercely, but the woman had a mean streak that came out during any kind of competition. She reached in her cardigan pocket and pulled out a couple of her special magic bombs.

Everyone groaned. Helen didn't waste any time, lobbing one directly into Janis' lap. It detonated with a flash before Janis could react, temporarily blinding her. Bea and I both had the good sense to close our eyes as soon as Helen pulled out the magic bomb, so other than the mass of dancing white spots, I could still see when I reopened my eyes.

Rather than lunging for the spoon, Helen smiled and waited for Bea to make her move. When Bea stood and bent to grab the spoon, Helen hauled her arm back like a major league pitcher and launched the bomb at her target. The magic bomb hit Bea right in the butt, and she jerked upright with a howl.

"Ow, ow, ow," Bea hollered, jumping from one foot to the other and swiping behind her like she could shoo the magic away. "What kind of evil sorcery did you put in these, you cow!"

"Fire ants," Helen boasted.

Helen was so busy laughing at Bea, that Janis grabbed one of the remaining spoons before she noticed. Once Janis waved the spoon triumphantly in front of her face, Helen gritted her teeth and reached through the flames and the snakes to come away with the last spoon. "You're out," she shouted at Bea, who was still rubbing her butt and glaring at Helen.

Janis leaned in to examine Alyce's four-of-a-kind. "Cheater! You changed that card." She pointed at the ace of spades before rummaging through her cards to produce a matching one.

Alyce ignored her and turned to me, her dark eyes warm. “Do you want popcorn?” she asked sweetly.

I grinned. “Always.”

While Alyce went to the kitchen, I gathered my courage. As soon as Alyce was back with the popcorn, Helen tossed her cards to the table and leveled me with a stare. “Now why don’t you tell us what’s really going on.”

I took a deep breath and did exactly that. This time, I didn’t sugar coat anything about my life in Santa Fe. Not one of them looked at me with pity or censure, and the tightness I’d been carrying around in my chest since this all started loosened. I also told them about Mateo’s visit and his threat to use them to get to me.

Helen’s chin tipped up, and she smiled at that. She turned to the others. “What do you say we teach that wolf what four old witches are capable of?”

After an hour of planning all sorts of nasty attacks and booby traps, I broached the other topic that brought me to their door. “Hey, listen, I’m going to be out of town for a few days, but I didn’t want you to worry.” I kept the dagger and the purpose for my upcoming trip to myself.

As soon as I uttered the word worry, I mentally slapped myself. Helen narrowed her eyes, latching right on to it. “There’s more to it than this Mateo guy, isn’t there? What kind of trouble are you in?”

“Who says I’m in trouble?”

“You did when you told us not to worry,” Helen said. The other witches murmured their agreement.

“Listen. Everything’s fine. It’s just a little road trip. That’s all. I planned it long before Mateo showed up.” *All true.* Getting out of town for a few days would also help keep the heat off. Now that I knew Mateo had been watching me, I’d be damned sure he didn’t follow.

“Is this about the alpha?” Bea angled her body closer to mine and gave me a knowing smile.

“What? No. This has nothing to do with him.” I caught the others all exchanging looks. “It doesn’t,” I insisted.

“Uh-huh,” Bea said. “That’s not what I heard.”

“Rumor has it that you spent the night at his house,” Alyce added.

I sputtered.

“I hope you used protection,” Helen admonished.

“Extra-large condoms, am I right?” Bea purred, nudging my knee.

I dropped my head to my hands with a groan. I needed to wrestle control of this conversation back before Bea started giving me blowjob tips. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“We can talk about your faulty sources later. Right now, I’m beat.” When Bea cackled and made a quip about a love marathon, I regretted my word choice. Rather than digging myself in deeper, I snapped my mouth shut and glared at them.

While Alyce and Bea took bets on my love life, Helen turned serious. “Fine. We won’t pry. But you call if you need us, hon. The safest place for you is right here, with people who can watch your back. You know that, right?”

I swallowed past the sudden lump in my throat. “I do. I love you girls.” I appreciated the sentiment, but I had more than my safety to worry about. If anything ever happened to these women because of me, I could never forgive myself.

Helen thumped me on the arm. “Promise me, you’ll talk to us before you run.” She leveled me with a look that said she knew exactly what I’d been considering. Helen once told me that I reminded her of herself when she was younger. She’d never told me what kind of trouble she’d gotten into, and I’d never pushed. But whatever it was made it easy for her to read me.

If it came to it, I owed them more than the disappearing act I pulled in Santa Fe. My heart ached just thinking about it. “I promise.”

Maybe it wouldn't come to that. Carl had found me and—for now at least—he hadn't come after me. Handing over the stone he coveted was out of the question. Carl would kill me the second he found where I'd stashed it. But if I could dangle it like a carrot, it might buy me enough time to dig up the dirt I needed to blackmail him.

All four women swarmed me for a group hug and announced tonight would be a witch slumber party. We hadn't all camped out in the living room since I was a teen, but I welcomed it. Spending time with Helen and the girls recharged my batteries like nothing else did. From the first time I met them, they felt like home.

The thought of leaving them behind and starting over somewhere else was more than I could contemplate. *One step at a time*, I reminded myself. I needed to secure the means to go on the run and enough dirt on Carl that I never had to use the option. That night, I slept surrounded by women who loved me—even if they did razz me mercilessly about my sex life.

CHAPTER 26



The coordinates for the buy popped up three days later. I plugged them into my maps app and dropped a pin on the location. Middle of nowhere Oklahoma it was. As I was googling bus routes that would get me close enough to call a ride share, a text popped up from Levon. The buyer demanded the handoff be moved up. Instead of having three more days, he wanted to meet tomorrow afternoon. That ruled out getting there by bus.

I debated my options. Kali had a car, but she wasn't in Kansas City at the moment to ask. Even if she had been, her hands were clean, and I wanted them to stay that way. I could try to sweet talk Helen into letting me borrow her station wagon, but she'd insist on coming along. Because I had no clue who this buyer was, I didn't want to drag a seventy-one-year-old witch into the middle of this.

That left me two choices—Dez, who was already neck deep in this, or stealing Hopper's truck and taking it for a joyride. The second option was tempting, but I doubted my driving skills would serve me well in the case of a high-speed chase. Plus, it would be nice to have someone to watch my back.

I climbed onto the fire escape and called Dez who agreed immediately, a note of excitement in his voice. Because he had a few errands to run before he could leave town, I told him I'd grab the dagger and meet him at his apartment. With that settled, I texted Levon with the make and model of car I'd be

in as he requested so he could pass it on to the buyer. Then, I arranged a ride share to take me to the Sundowner.

I grabbed what was left of my meager tip money and threw enough clothes in a bag to last me a week—just in case. When I looked out my front window, I saw a car idling at the curb. My ride was here early.

After locking up behind me, I headed downstairs to my waiting ride. I slid into the backseat convinced things were finally starting to look up, which is why the driver caught me off guard. He held a slip of paper out to me. When I reached for it without thinking, he grabbed my wrist and jerked me forward, slamming a metal handcuff on it—a silver handcuff. Nash Mitchell secured the other cuff to the metal bars of his headrest. I had to give him credit. The guy was resourceful—and fast for a human.

My first question probably should have been something along the lines of, are you going to kill me? But that wasn't what came out of my mouth. "How did you know I booked a ride share?" I did it through the app, so it wasn't like he could have overheard a call. Did he somehow have my phone tapped?

He tipped the rearview mirror so he could see me. "I didn't until I saw the driver pull up to your apartment."

"You've been watching my apartment?"

He flicked his gaze to my handcuffed wrist. "That's really not your biggest problem at the moment, darlin."

I rolled my eyes at the darlin. When he lifted the gun in his lap high enough for me to see it, my humor vanished. I might be dealing with a human, but Nash Mitchell was a trained killer. One who baited demon traps like he was some kind of supernatural vigilante. The man was loco.

"What did you do with the driver?" I asked, dread pooling in my stomach.

"In the trunk."

I swiveled my head around to look at the trunk. "You killed him?"

“He’ll live. I have no beef with the driver. You, on the other hand...” He let his voice trail off. “Now, put your other hand on top of your head where I can see it,” he ordered.

I did as he asked. *There goes my ability to send an SOS text.*

I weighed my odds. Getting out of these cuffs would be child’s play, but the gun changed things. I’d need to wait for a distraction. I couldn’t let him get me out in the sticks, but there was a lot of city driving left before that became an issue. In the meantime, my best bet was to keep him talking.

“How did you find my place? You shouldn’t have even remembered our faces.” I wondered if my guess about his tinnitus interfering with compulsion was right.

“Your buddy’s mind control doesn’t work on me.”

Even if it was because of the ringing in his ears, he was the first person I met who shared my resistance to compulsion. And that made me curious. “Why not?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. It worked on all the other soldiers with me.” Did he mean the other soldiers on his last op? Dez’s report listed it as a black op in Peru.

I frowned. “Who compelled them? The mercenaries you talked about before?” I pictured the so-called Shadows who had escorted us to the Compound. But Romania was a long way from Peru. When he ignored my question, I got to the point. “Where are you taking me?”

“We’re going to take a little drive to the safe deposit box where you put my dagger, and you’re going to get it for me.”

At least Nash grabbed me before I swung by the Sundowner to retrieve the dagger. He smiled in the mirror. For all his scruff, the man had remarkably nice teeth. *Which is a weird thing to be noticing given the gun and all,* I chided myself.

With traffic, the drive to the safe deposit rental place on Metcalf would take a good twenty minutes. There’d be plenty of opportunities to bail. In the meantime, I had questions I wanted answers to. I’d learned young that the fastest way to

get information from a macho guy like this was to let him think he had the upper hand. I rattled the cuffs like I was trying to pull free and glared at him.

“Does the silver burn?” he asked curiously.

Silver did affect most shifters, causing a rash upon casual contact. Prolonged contact with silver was supposed to interfere with the ability to shift, but I’d never seen anyone exposed to it long enough to test the theory. Like my immunity to compulsion, silver had never had an effect on me. No sense telling him that though. “No. You should really get your information somewhere other than bad television shows.”

“Too bad.”

“How do you know where I put the dagger?” I asked as if we hadn’t found the bug he’d left in my apartment.

“I can be very persuasive.” It was as much of a warning as an explanation.

I didn’t plan on sticking around long enough to find out. “Why do you want that dagger so badly? The VA disability checks not covering expenses?” It was a good thing I had thieving to fall back on because I’d be an even worse hostage negotiator than I was a bartender if the look on this guy’s face was any indication.

He ground his teeth and changed lanes, moving us to the slow-moving left lane. “I’m surprised you’re smart enough to dig up dirt on me, kid.”

“Don’t call me kid,” I snapped before I caught myself. “You’d be surprised at what I can do.”

He turned his turn signal on and took the next exit. “What else do you know about me?”

“Wade Mitchell, but your buddies call you Nash, 42, decorated Army veteran, put out to pasture after a blown op in Peru. Ringing any bells?”

The flash of anger on Nash’s face told me I’d hit a nerve. I knew from experience that an angry man was far more likely to make a mistake than a calm one, so I kept needling. “What

did you do? Run drugs to make a little cash? Maybe look the other way on a weapons shipment?”

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

I smirked. “You’re obviously an enterprising kind of guy. I mean you got your hands on a magical dagger. It’s too bad you have no idea how to move the thing. A museum in a small town? Really?” From where I was sitting directly behind him, I could see his hand tense on the gear shift. “Tell you what. You let me out, I’ll cut you in for ten percent,” I offered.

He laughed. “I don’t give two shits about the money, kid.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop my knee-jerk reaction to the kid. I hated being called that, but my earlier reaction already told him it bothered me. “If it’s not about the money, then what?”

Nash stopped at a red light. “Demon bait.” He watched through the mirror for my reaction.

My mouth fell open. When I recovered from my shock, I gawked at him. “You can’t possibly be that stupid.”

The tic in his jaw said otherwise. I sat up straighter. “You’re telling me that you listed that dagger hoping to draw a demon out.”

“Correct.”

“And then what?” I leaned forward. “What exactly did you plan to do with a demon once you caught him?”

Nash’s hazel eyes were stone-cold in the mirror. “I planned to kill him.”

A startled laugh escaped before I could stop it. “You can’t kill a demon.”

“And I suppose you can?” he sneered.

“No. Dude, no one can kill a demon. The best you can do is send him back to hell, and—sorry to break it to you—but you don’t have the magical chops to do that.” I leaned back against the seat and studied him. “You should be thanking me for taking it off your hands.”

He ignored that as we approached a yellow light, this one at a busy intersection. There were several cars in front of us and a few more boxing us in on both sides.

“You know what I think?” I asked as he slowed down.

“What?”

The car rolled to a stop. “I think a decorated military hero like you isn’t about to open fire on a busy street.” Before I was done talking, I brought my feet up and kicked the headrest free. I lifted the cuffs and dove for the door. I ignored the curious stares and headed straight for the strip mall next to the road, banking on the belief that anyone who fancied himself a demon hunter wasn’t about to follow me into the children’s store I ducked into.

I stopped in the bathroom long enough to pick the lock and ditch the cuffs in the trash. Adrenaline was still pumping through my veins, so I took a minute to splash some water on my face before I walked out the back of the store. I pinballed my way through neighboring stores until I was sure I’d lost Nash Mitchell. Then, I texted Dez an address a few blocks away and asked him to pick me. As an afterthought, I told him to pack for our trip. The faster we got that dagger out of Kansas City, the better.

CHAPTER 27



After Dez picked me up, we stopped at the Sundowner to retrieve the dagger. Despite it being mid-afternoon, two of Volkov's wolves were already sharing a pitcher of beer. From the way they watched me, I knew they'd report back to him as soon as I was out the door.

Because I didn't need him hunting me down, I decided to head off trouble by calling him. I waited until Dez was filling up at a nearby gas station. I pulled out my phone but paused to lean over and roll down the driver's side window first.

"Can you get snacks?" I asked Dez.

He made a face at me but didn't say no. When I kept giving him puppy dog eyes, he caved like I knew he would. "What kind of snacks?"

"All kinds of snacks." I watched him go inside before rolling the window back up. After a few minutes of stalling, I finally dialed Volkov's number.

He answered on the first ring. "Where are you?"

"That's a weird way to say hello."

"Riley," he growled. "I know something's wrong. First your so-called date and now a mid-day visit to the Sundowner. What's going on?"

I knew those wolves would speed dial Volkov to tattle. "I'm calling to let you know I'll be out of town for a couple days." Dez climbed back in the car holding an armful of sweet and salty goodies. I held up a finger, so he'd wait to start the

engine. “*This won’t take long,*” I mouthed. “I didn’t want you to worry,” I told Volkov.

The silence stretched out long enough I started to squirm. Whenever Volkov got quiet, it wasn’t good. “Alone?” he finally asked. “Or with that wolf?”

For a second, I considered telling him who Mateo was and what he wanted. I had no doubt that Volkov could handle Mateo—even Carl—if it came down to a fair fight. Carl wasn’t stupid though. If he went after Volkov, there would be nothing fair about it. Even in an unfair fight, my money would be on Volkov. But I didn’t want it to come to that if I could help it. As long as Mateo kept reporting back to him, Carl would have no reason to step foot in Kansas City himself.

It wasn’t only the fear of Volkov facing Carl that made me hold my tongue. The minute I told him who Mateo was, Volkov would go into overbearing alpha mode. He’d lock me down no matter how much I argued. That was something I couldn’t risk.

As a vampire, Dez’s hearing was almost as good as a shifter’s, which meant he didn’t miss the anger in Volkov’s voice at the thought of me skipping town with Mateo. I caught Dez gawking at me. I swatted the air in front of him to get him to close his mouth.

“Definitely not.” I’d have to fill Volkov in on who Mateo actually was when I got back. Now was not the time to bring up the fact that Carl sent one of his wolves into Volkov’s backyard to threaten me—not if I wanted to make it out of Kansas City without incident. “I’m with Dez.”

Volkov was quiet again, and I searched for a believable reason why we’d be going on a road trip.

“It’s like a girls’ trip,” I said, earning a punch in the arm from a now glowering Dez.

He snatched the bag of gummy worms he’d just handed me and tossed them out the window into the trashcan next to the gas pumps. I scrambled to grab the supersized bag of pork rinds and the candy bars before he could toss them out, too.

“A girls’ trip?” Volkov rumbled.

“Yup. We’re going Thelma and Louise style.” Maybe referencing a movie where they drove off a cliff wasn’t the best choice.

Volkov didn’t call me on it though, so I assumed he wasn’t big on old movies. “Where are you going?”

I answered truthfully. “Oklahoma.” It hardly seemed like a place where I could get into trouble.

“Oklahoma?”

“Yup. Dez’s sister lives there.” I didn’t know if Dez had a sister, but I was banking on the fact that Volkov knew even less about my new vamp BFF than I did. I opened the bag of pork rinds and offered one to Dez who turned his nose up at them. “More for me,” I mouthed.

Volkov was quiet for a long time, and I waited for his typical blowup. Instead, he sighed. “Be careful, Riley.”

It wasn’t exactly a ringing endorsement that he believed I could take care of myself, but it was something. Just the fact that he was trying made something warm take hold in my chest. “You, too,” I said with a catch in my voice.

I hung up before I changed my mind and confessed why I was headed to Oklahoma. Volkov might be making progress, but I couldn’t afford to be foolish enough to risk him shutting this trip down.

Dez waited until we made it to the interstate to start in. “So, you and the alpha, huh?” He wiggled his bushy red eyebrows suggestively.

“That’s totally creepy, bro. Never do that again.”

He laughed. “I take it you’re not going to share the juicy details?”

“Nope.”

I had Dez take a lot of back roads and random routes. By the time we were out of Kansas City, I was positive we didn’t have a tail. Just to be safe, I made Dez pull onto the shoulder

of the highway after passing the first good hill. When there was no sign of Mateo, I relaxed and turned on the radio so Dez and I could belt out pop tunes for the next hundred miles.

On the drive, we came up with a rendezvous point further down the road and a code word in case something went wrong. After much discussion, we settled on tomato for the code word. Dez liked it because it reminded him of my Bloody Marys, and I liked it because it reminded me of his hair.

We reached the meeting spot four hours early. I'd never handled this end of a job before, so I was thankful to have ample time to scout the area. Instead of a populated area like Tulsa or Oklahoma City, our meetup point was a nearly deserted rest stop off I-35. The only other vehicles were a couple semis whose drivers were probably napping in their cabs.

I texted Levon confirmation that I made it to the drop site, and he messaged back to sit tight. The buyer would meet me at the covered picnic area at the arranged time. I was supposed to be alone, so Dez hid in the men's restroom an hour before the meet. The small dirty window at the top of the bathroom faced the picnic area. He wasn't thrilled that he needed to climb on the toilet tank to be able to see out, but people were willing to do a lot worse things for the kind of fat payday we were about to score.

Because there was little to occupy me, I spent the next hour contemplating the myriad of ways this could go wrong. There were only two of us, and while Dez was technically a vampire, he had zero fighting skills. Although Levon had assured me that the buyer would pay in cold, hard cash, where the heck was I going to put a suitcase full of money without getting busted? And that was if the buyer didn't show up with a sharpshooter who took me out the second he spotted the dagger. *Idiot*. I might be an amazing thief, but my magical artifact fencing skills were seriously lacking. Too late now to make adjustments, though.

I watched the parking area for my buyer to show. A few cars came and went, but none of them seemed like the type of people who paid a ton of money for a stolen dagger. When a

dark SUV parked in front of the picnic area, anxiety churned in my gut. *Something's not right.*

Both doors opened at the same time. Mateo stepped out of the passenger's side, but my full attention was on the driver—Carl. *That weasel Levon sold me out.* I'd thought our mutual hatred of Carl was enough to protect me. That misjudgment was going to cost me.

For a second, I was that scared twelve-year-old girl again, staring into the face of my warden. I almost shifted then and there, the impulse so strong I felt fur prickling along my arms. Every beat of my heart hammered out run, run, run. *Goats are prey, and these men are wolves.*

One look at the smug anticipation on Mateo's handsome face told me all I needed to know. They wanted me to run, so they could hunt me down. On two legs or four, it didn't matter. *Your odds are better like this.* I bit down on the inside of my cheek, the pain enough to break me out of the overwhelming urge to shift.

I had two things in my favor in a fight. First, I knew how to take a punch. I'd seen far bigger guys lose because they let the dizziness and blurred vision of a solid hit distract them. If you couldn't fight despite the vertigo, you were screwed, no matter how good your right hook was.

Second, I knew every one of these men's weaknesses.

Mateo loved the limelight, especially in a fight. He favored stupid spinning kicks and prancing around like a show pony instead of going for the quick takedown. He also enjoyed the attention his pretty face drew from the ladies, which meant he protected it over more vulnerable areas of his body.

Carl was the opposite of Mateo when he fought. He was quick, brutal, and not above fighting dirty. There was zero hesitation as he went for your throat. But Carl was old school, which meant he unfailingly categorized women as weak. He was more likely to backhand me than throw a punch. Unless he was ready to kill me. Then, his jaws would be at my throat the same as he'd go after a man.

They knew none of my weaknesses because they'd never seen me fight back. Other than that well-placed groin kick, I'd never tangled with Mateo. And I'd never raised a hand to Carl. My teenage years had been about survival, and that had required using my wits more often than my fists.

When I landed in Kansas City, I may have fully embraced my wild side, but I also took enough kickboxing and martial arts classes that I knew how to fight. Plus, Helen had made it her mission to show me every dirty trick in her arsenal. And Helen was the queen of dirty tricks.

Instead of running like Carl and Mateo expected, I braced my weight on the balls of my feet and palmed the hilt of the dagger inside my jacket. I wasn't going anywhere with these men, even if it meant I left this rest stop in a body bag.

Despite being eight years older than the last time I saw him, Carl looked exactly the same. Carl didn't come near Volkov's bulk or even Mateo's height. He was only a couple inches taller than my five-eight and lean. What he lacked in size, he made up for in ruthlessness. There was little Carl wasn't willing to do to get what he wanted. All you had to do was look into those flat, dark eyes to know he'd kill his own mother without remorse. In all the years I'd known him, I'd never seen a hint of softness.

Carl crossed the grass to the picnic area, Mateo falling in lock step with him. They stopped a few feet from me. I held my ground despite the tremors wracking my body.

"You cost me a lot of money, kid," Carl said.

He was lying. Carl had no intention of selling the stone I'd stolen from under his nose. I knew for a fact that Carl had chased the Alatyrr stone for a decade because he thought it would make him invincible. That's what made taking it from him so damn satisfying.

"What do you want?" I watched as Mateo separated from Carl, so they could box me in, the picnic table blocking my retreat.

Carl shot me a nasty smile. “I want what you owe me.” He scanned me from head to toe. Unlike Mateo’s perusal, there was no flicker of interest in Carl’s gaze—just stone-cold assessment of the woman I’d become.

“I don’t owe you shit,” I spat. “I made you a rich man. If anything, you owe me.” I hated that the loot he sent me after solidified his power. It made me complicit in everything he’d done since then.

When I’d double-crossed him on that last job, I’d purposely dropped his beta’s credit card, hoping Damien Creed would trace it back to Carl and take revenge. Carl had a way of evading consequences though. It seemed that extended to robbing Creed. *Too bad.*

Mateo laughed. “You hear that, boss. The kid thinks you owe her.”

Carl didn’t spare him a glance. Instead, he studied me. “Did you grow a backbone, girl? Or maybe you think that new alpha of yours will protect you?” He scanned the nearly empty parking lot. “Because he’s not here to run interference.”

I lifted my chin and pulled the dagger free. Carl’s gaze flicked to the blade and widened in interest. *Had Levon tipped him off to my location without telling him what I stole?* A car with tinted windows drove past, slowing for a second before speeding off. *Could that have been the actual buyer and Carl’s posturing scared him off?* I knew I was grasping at straws, but Levon’s betrayal stung.

Dez must have finally caught sight of Mateo’s familiar face and realized these two were not legit buyers because he came out to confront them. If I had any doubt that this was Dez’s first fight, his next words confirmed it. “Stop, or I’ll shoot!”

I groaned. The two wolves exchanged bewildered looks and then promptly turned their backs on the ginger poking an obvious finger through his jacket pocket like it was an actual gun.

Mateo scratched his cheek. “Who’s the geek?” Although Mateo saw Dez at the Sundowner when he paid me an unexpected visit, I hadn’t bothered with introductions.

Undeterred, Dez tried again. “I called the police, you know. You better hightail your furry asses out of here before they get here.”

Carl jerked his head toward Dez, who wisely was keeping his distance. “Take care of him,” he told Mateo.

Fear for my friend snaked through me. Dez was no match for a seasoned fighter like Mateo. I needed to do something to draw his attention back to me. “How’s the family jewels?” I taunted. It was a lame attempt, but it was the first thing that popped in my head.

Mateo didn’t even turn around. I watched Dez stumble back a few steps with a growing sense of panic as Mateo advanced on him. “Run!” I yelled, adding our code word for good measure. “Tomato!” Dez took his eyes off Mateo long enough to shake his head at me. The fool was going to get himself killed.

Carl took advantage of my distraction and kicked the hand holding the knife. I lost my grip on it, and it dropped to the ground next to me. Instead of diving for the knife like Carl probably expected, I kicked it behind me to keep it out of Carl’s hands. Then, I leapt into the air and grabbed the overhead crossbeam on the picnic shelter and drew my knees to my chest. Carl’s punch clipped my boot.

Before he could regroup, I kicked out with both feet, catching Carl square in the face. He careened backwards from the impact, and I launched myself at him. I fisted my hands together and brought them down on his head while bringing my knee up to meet his face. He dropped to one knee and cradled his head.

When he looked up, his eyes promised retribution. “I might need you alive, kid, but you’re going to pay for that.”

And the second he has that stone I stole for him, he’ll kill me with pleasure. I scrambled toward the dagger, dipping to

pick it up as I ran. I'd never killed a man before, but I had no qualms about killing Carl. This was my chance to finish this, to take my life back, so I never had to run again.

I raised the dagger and took a step toward Carl but stopped abruptly when I heard the bone-jarring growl behind me. Mateo had shifted and herded Dez behind the restrooms and out of sight of any passing cars. I turned to look just as Mateo lunged for Dez's throat. Dez held his hands in front of him like he could hold off a werewolf's powerful jaws with his bare hands. I turned my back on Carl and ran as fast as I could, praying Dez could hold Mateo off long enough for me to get to him.

Mateo bit down on Dez's forearm and twisted his head, tearing the flesh to the bone. When I reached them, I buried the dagger in Mateo's side, arcing it upwards to inflict as much damage as possible. He released Dez and turned to face me, howling in pain. I pulled the dagger out and plunged it back in again, this time aiming for his heart. Mateo collapsed, the fight leaving his body almost immediately.

I spun around, conscious of Carl at my back. He had staggered to his feet and was watching me, a gleam in his eye that I couldn't decipher. Another car slowed, and the middle-aged woman driving rolled down her window, calling out to make sure Carl was okay. Thankfully, her full attention was on Carl's busted-up face and not on the bit of bloody fur visible at my feet. I tipped my head. Despite his shock, Dez grabbed the dead wolf and pulled him behind the building, leaving a blood trail in the grass.

Carl ignored the woman in the car and took a step toward me. When she held out her cell phone and offered to call for help, he paused. That gave me enough time to reach for the dagger still buried in Mateo's chest. Carl's gaze flicked to the bloody dagger I now held in my hand, and he smiled. My blood ran cold even as he walked to his SUV and climbed inside, not sparing a glance for the dead wolf he left behind.

I bent to wipe the bloody dagger on Mateo's fur. Only the dagger beat me to it. I watched the blood disappear from the

steel blade as if it had never been there. I blinked. The flames in the center gem of the pommel flared brighter.

I dropped it and looked at Dez's pale face. "What the hell was that?"

He shook his head and backed away from the weapon. The sound of squealing tires broke through the shock. Carl's SUV sped off, along with my chance to end him.

CHAPTER 28



We carried Mateo's body into the wooded area behind the rest stop and left him for the scavengers. Because shifters retained whatever form they died in, he'd appear like a large wolf if anyone found him before his carcass was picked clean. It'd be weird for a dead wolf to be found in Oklahoma and would probably make the news, but at least it wouldn't prompt a murder investigation.

Because Dez's squeamishness meant he almost fainted every time he caught sight of the jagged wound, I'd torn one of my t-shirts into strips to bandage Dez's arm. We'd both cleaned up as best we could in a rest stop bathroom.

I glanced at Dez. He was still shaken up, and I felt terrible. This was all my fault. I should have never pulled Dez into this crazy mess.

"Dez." When he didn't respond, I called his name again, and this time, he looked at me. "We have to go. Do you want me to drive?"

That was enough to snap him out of his shock. "I'll drive."

We took the back roads. By the time I had Dez stop at a cheap motel where we could regroup, the shock had worn off. The first thing I did after checking in was dial Levon's number.

He picked up on the first ring. "Is it done?"

"You sold me out, you little weasel," I yelled.

"Just business." Levon hung up.

I tossed the phone on the bed and screamed. “We’re screwed.”

“Can’t you just find another fence?” After pulling the corner of the sheet up to look for evidence of bedbugs, Dez sat on the bed.

I fell back onto the mattress beside him. Bedbugs were the least of my worries. “No. It would take months to vet a new fence.” I sat up and got the dagger out, staring into the flames. “I don’t have months.”

Dez stood. “Maybe there’s another way.” He grabbed the door keycard. “I’ll be right back.” When he returned, he had his laptop. Instead of explaining, he sat at the wobbly table and started typing.

I lifted my head from the mattress. “What are you doing?”

“Cutting out the middleman.” He smiled and flipped the screen around. “When I hacked into the auction house database, I downloaded the entire thing, which means—”

“Which means you have the names and addresses of everyone who bid on that dagger.” I scrambled off the bed and joined him at the table. “Who was the highest bidder?”

Dez enlarged the text and pointed to a name on the screen. “One Mr. Fred Parker.” He scrolled until he found the bid. “His last bid was for a cool million dollars.”

I whistled. That was a nice chunk of change. After getting burned by Levon, I tempered my excitement. I needed to think this through. Because we’d found this guy through the auction site, it was unlikely he had any connection with Carl. The guy’s name was so generic, it could easily be a fake, but in all the years I knew Carl, he’d alternated between two aliases when on a job. Neither of them was Fred Parker. “Is there an address listed for him?”

Dez shook his head. “No. Just a phone number. Hold on.” After a couple minutes of typing, he looked up. “Unlisted number.”

That was a good sign that he wasn’t some amateur. But without an address, verifying this guy’s identity was

impossible. “Where’s the area code?”

Dez did a quick search. “Looks like it’s a Colorado number.” With cell phones, that didn’t necessarily mean the owner lived in Colorado, but at least it wasn’t a New Mexico number. I grabbed my burner phone and punched in the number. Then, I crossed my fingers and hoped he’d pick up. No one answered, and there wasn’t a voicemail.

Before I could run down the list of buyers for the next best option, a text came through. *How did you get this number?*

I kept my identity to myself, but I typed out my proposition along with a photo of the dagger as proof I had it. I offered him the dagger for twenty percent less than he’d bid. It was a number high enough to be in the ballpark but low enough to be tempting. The reply was immediate. *Where and when?*

I sent a text asking for his location, but the only answer I got back was a repeat of “where and when.” I bit my lip.

Carl would come at me again. That much, I was sure of. The longer I was out here in no man’s land, the more opportunities I gave him. On the other hand, I didn’t want to draw yet another potential danger to Kansas City.

In the end, I settled for asking if the buyer could meet me in Oklahoma City. He seemed as anxious to get his hands on the dagger as I was to offload it, and he agreed to meet up in a few days. That would give me enough time to case the area where we’d be doing the handoff. Even though I’d contacted the buyer directly this time, I didn’t want to rush head-first into more trouble.

Once we agreed on coordinates for the drop, I sent the buyer bank info for an account Dez had the foresight to set up via a shell company for just this purpose. I’d hand over the dagger right after I confirmed the money had been transferred into my account.

I grabbed Dez’s keys and tossed them to him. “Bring your laptop.”

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’m starving. What do you say we celebrate over French fries and ice cream sundaes?”

Dez looked less than enthused, but he followed me out to his car.

When we got in the car, I fumbled my phone, and it slid between the seat and the console. I pushed the seat back and bent down, so I could find it. My phone wasn’t the only thing I found under the seat. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Levon might have set me up, but Carl would’ve found me, anyway. I reached under the seat and came up with the small electronic tag hidden beneath it. Dez’s eyes widened.

“Mateo.”

Dez shuddered at the mention of the dead wolf’s name but squared his shoulders. “When?”

“That night at the Sundowner when he followed us to the car. After Mateo buckled me in, he dropped his hand to my seat. I thought he was trying to intimidate me, but he was actually planting this.”

Dez snatched it out of my hand. Instead of looking it over as I had been, he opened his car door, dropped the tag on the ground, and prepared to crush it beneath his heel.

“Wait!” I yelled, getting an idea. “We’re going to need that.”

He picked it up and reluctantly handed it to me. I dropped it back where I found it. With a frown, Dez started the car and peeled out of the parking lot like Carl was already on our tail. I watched the rearview mirror in case he was. We skipped the ice cream and headed for the interstate.

After a few minutes of tense silence, Dez pointed to my phone. “Pull up maps and find me a route to the buy coordinates.”

My heart clutched in my chest. Even after being attacked and helping me dispose of a dead wolf, Dez wanted to come with me to watch my back. I turned my head so I could wipe

my damp eyes on my shirt without him noticing. Then, I cleared my throat. “You can’t come with me, Dez.”

He tapped the steering wheel impatiently. “Put the coordinates in, Riley, and give me directions.”

“Dez, I’m serious.”

When he ignored me, I tried to reason with him. “I know Carl. If he wasn’t planning to kill me before, he definitely will be now that I attacked him. Because of that tag, he already knows exactly where we are. He needs to think we’re headed back to Kansas City.” All of that was true.

“Good thing he has no idea we’re headed to Oklahoma City then,” Dez said. “Once we ditch that tag, he won’t be able to track us.”

I shifted in my seat, so I was facing him. “Listen to me. The only chance I’ve got of meeting up with this buyer and walking away alive is if you lead Carl away from me.”

That finally broke through Dez’s stubbornness. “What do you mean?”

“We’ll split up. You’ll head home, and I’ll go to the buy. As long as this tag is in your car, Carl will follow you. Once you get to Kansas City, smash the tracker.” When he didn’t look convinced, I went for the low blow. “Unless you don’t trust me not to take off with your cut.”

Dez’s head jerked toward me. “That’s not it.”

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t blame you.”

Dez gripped the wheel tighter and sighed. “If we split up, how will you get to Oklahoma City? You don’t have a car.”

I stared out the passenger side window for a minute, formulating my plan. If there was one thing I was good at, it was thinking on my feet. “Pull over here.” I leaned forward and pointed to a sign ahead of us for the next exit. I could see the truck stop from the interstate where I spotted my perfect ride.

Dez didn’t argue.

As soon as Dez parked in front of the building, I bent over the console and snagged my money out of my duffle bag. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

Inside, I bought a cheap prepaid cell phone and ten dollars’ worth of minutes. Before leaving, I scanned the restaurant side until I spotted a man dressed in dusty blue jeans and cowboy boots sitting in one of the booths. After buying a drink, I paused at his table. “Are those your horses?” I pointed to a horse trailer parked between two semis.

“Yes, ma’am.” He stared out the window. “You notice something wrong?”

“No, no. Nothing like that.” I followed his gaze. “I’m a city girl, just passing through.” I pointed to my bright pink hair with a rueful smile. “I don’t get much of a chance to see horses.” I smiled and crossed my fingers behind my back, hoping wherever he was from was in the right direction. “Where are you from?”

“Valley Brook.” At my blank look, he chuckled. “It’s about fifteen minutes on the other side of Oklahoma City.”

My smile widened. “Would you mind if I peeked inside? I won’t bother them.”

He smiled back at me. “You go right ahead. They love people, so just make sure they know you’re there, and they’ll probably beg for pets.” He chuckled.

“Thank you so much!” I pointed down to his barely touched meal. “I’ll leave you to your food. Have a safe trip home.”

Once outside, I tossed my old burner phone into the trash. After getting back in the car with Dez, I pulled out my personal phone and dialed Helen’s number. It went to voice mail. I left her a message telling her there’d been a complication and that I’d be off grid for a few more days and not to worry. Then, I tucked my phone into the glove compartment. At Dez’s questioning look, I explained, “In case they’re tracking it, they’ll think I’m with you.”

He nodded his approval. “Smart.”

I grabbed my duffel bag from the backseat and shoved what was left of my money inside. It wasn't much—less than a hundred bucks. But it only had to last me until I unloaded this dagger. Once the buyer paid up, I'd be flush with cash. I'd have more than enough to buy a bus ticket home.

“What's the plan?” Dez asked.

“You see that trailer?” I pointed to the horse trailer parked alongside the semis.

Dez's eyebrows shot up. “You're going to hitch a ride in a horse trailer?”

I grinned. “Sure am.”

“Why not get a ride from one of those trucks?” He pointed at the semis.

“Because I need to mask my scent in case Carl comes nosing around. Can you drop me over there?” I pointed.

Dez reluctantly pulled around behind the horse trailer and put the car in park.

I reached across the seat and gave him a quick squeeze. “Do not stop. Put that good gas mileage to use and drive straight through. Once you get back to Kansas City, promise me you'll keep your head down until I'm back.”

“I will,” Dez agreed. “Be careful.”

“You, too.”

I got out and slung the bag behind me so that only the strap would be visible to anyone who looked out the restaurant window. After pausing by the slatted side for a few minutes to coo at the two horses, I walked behind the trailer. Fortunately, the trailer was facing the building, allowing me to open the back and slip inside unnoticed. Although the horses whinnied and eyed me, they let me sidle past them.

I stripped down and tossed my clothes into the duffel bag before stashing it in the corner. With a groan, I bent down and scooped up some fresh horse poop with my left hand and smeared it on my naked legs, not willing to get it any closer to

my face than I had to. I fought the urge to gag and wiped my hand on the side of the trailer. Then, I shifted into my goat.

The horse in the stall with me shuffled as far as the ropes securing her allowed before eyeing me warily. I scooted closer to the corner, away from the heavy body that could easily crush my slighter frame with one sharp turn of the trailer. After a few minutes, the horse ignored me. I settled myself in for what was guaranteed to be a long ride to Oklahoma City.

CHAPTER 29



When the trailer stopped on the outskirts of Oklahoma City to fuel up, I snuck out of the back. After the driver left, I ambled inside and made good use of the rent-a-showers in the full-service truck stop. Hitching a ride into the city proved easy enough, and I spent the next few days checking out the meet site during the day and crashing at an abandoned building each night.

By late Thursday afternoon, I was sitting in a coffee shop's outdoor seating area watching the alley where I was supposed to meet my buyer in less than an hour. From my vantage point, I could see the entrance. No one had come or gone for the past two and a half hours. I knew because I'd been nursing my overpriced drink. The sugar was making my already jittery nerves worse.

That left me two potential escape routes if things went sideways. I could either sprint to the coffee shop side, or I could climb the fire escape located mid-alley. I stashed my duffle bag in a recessed doorway and put my back to the building so I could watch for my buyer to show. Then, I compulsively checked my watch every couple minutes.

The man who rounded the corner and walked toward me seemed younger than I expected. Because he was wearing an oversized sweatshirt with the hood up, I only got a glimpse of his face. Coupled with his slight build, there was no way he could be Carl. The tension in my shoulders eased. I waited until he was closer to verify he was my guy. "Fred?"

The man nodded, his eyes scanning the alley behind me.

When I heard a vehicle, I turned to look. My heart rate kicked up. The last time I saw a van like that was in Romania, right before armed men dropped a hood over my head and shoved me inside. The urge to bolt took hold.

I glanced back at Fred, but he didn't seem concerned. *Calm down. It's probably just a delivery van.*

At the sound of the driver's door opening, I turned in time to see a large man climb out. He had a buzz cut and moved with the grace of a big cat as he stepped around the van. His eyes weren't visible through the dark sunglasses he wore. Despite the overflowing dumpsters between us masking his scent, my instincts screamed shifter.

I pulled the dagger out of my jacket. Holding the dagger in front of me, I hoped the van would block anyone from seeing me stab him if it came to it. A week ago, the only thing I stabbed was smoked meat with my fork. Still, I'd do what I had to in order to survive.

That didn't mean stabbing someone was my first choice. I spun on my heel to face Fred. If I had to take one of these guys on, I was picking the scrawny buyer.

The chances of the man blocking my escape route being a legit buyer were nil. He'd obviously brought back up planning to rip me off. As soon as Fred was close enough for me to see his eyes, I groaned. He had the trademark black eyes of a full demon. Like vampires, demons eyes turned red with blood lust, but the rest of the time, their eyes were pitch black. Just like Zepar, this was no run-of-the-mill vampire coming toward me—not with eyes like that.

“Stop!” he boomed, compulsion thick in his voice.

Just like vampire and alpha commands, demon compulsion had no effect on me. Demons were strong though, and I was far from unbreakable. He was also between me and the fire escape.

I'd have to take my chances with the shifter. I pivoted and ran the other way, but a hand on my jacket jerked me to a stop.

Before I could shrug out of it, the demon yanked me against him and collared my throat with his hand.

“You have something that belongs to me,” he whispered in my ear.

I flipped the dagger in my palm and stabbed backwards, but I only grazed his leg as he shifted his weight. His free hand grasped my wrist and squeezed until the dagger dropped from my hand. It clattered against the ground. The demon squeezed my throat until I was afraid he’d crush my windpipe. The alley dimmed as he cut off my air supply.

“Hey!” Someone yelled from down the alley, and he tossed me aside. I hit the wall hard. The last thing I saw before I blacked out was the van driver bending over to retrieve my stolen dagger.

When I came to, I was face down next to the dumpster. From the way my body felt, the demon must have tossed me aside like yesterday’s garbage. Whoever yelled to interrupt the attack was nowhere in sight. I sat up and leaned against the brick wall behind me. When the tears came, I didn’t fight them. After everything Dez and I went through to keep this dagger, I sat here empty-handed. *No dagger. No pile of cash. No plan.* I was well and truly screwed.

I allowed myself a ten-minute pity party before staggering to my feet. I grabbed my duffle bag and marched out of the alley. I knew the odds. There was no way I could track the demon down. Whether I liked it or not, that dagger was gone, and with it, my best chance of escaping Carl’s wrath.

I made a pit stop at the coffee shop and ordered a double shot of espresso. Normally, I didn’t touch caffeine because it amped me up like a toddler on pixie sticks. But if I ever needed a shot of energy, it was today. I slammed my drink and asked for directions to the nearest school.

The sun was setting by the time I reached the middle school, and there wasn’t a car in sight. I circled around back and jimmied open a window. Then, I searched for the nurse’s office. After finding a splint for my injured wrist, I set my

alarm for five a.m. and laid gingerly on the cot. It didn't take long for my eyes to close and merciful sleep to drag me under.

My alarm went off for a solid five minutes before it woke me. I found the girls' locker room and took a quick shower. Because all I had was a cheap burner phone and I didn't want to be on the premises when school staff started arriving, I headed to the nearest library to use the internet. I checked the online bus schedules and fares, which were all pricier than I could afford with the seventy-four dollars I had left to my name.

Hitchhiking wasn't appealing. There were a lot of pervs out there, and while I might have a shifter's strength, I didn't want to risk it. I could steal enough for bus fare, but with my current unlucky streak, I was likely to pickpocket an off-duty police officer.

It was late afternoon before I caved and called Helen for a ride. When my call went to voicemail after a couple rings, I tried again. Finally, someone answered.

It wasn't Helen.

"She's busy," a gruff voice answered before hanging up.

What the hell? Not to be deterred, I dialed again. This time, Helen answered. "Who is this?"

"Helen, it's me. Riley." My voice was rough, and I could feel the demon's hands around my throat every time I swallowed.

I heard her yell, "Hey!" as she wrestled someone for the phone.

"Where the fuck are you at?" Volkov snarled.

I clutched the phone tighter. "Why are you at Helen's? Is she okay?"

"She's fine. Now, tell me where you are." He sounded furious.

"I'm stranded in Oklahoma City." I kept the why to myself.

“Where?” he snapped.

If Carl caught up with me, better Volkov in the car with me than Helen. I gave him the library’s address.

“I’m coming to get you. Stay where you are, or so help me ___”

“I’ll be here,” I interrupted. “Do you want this phone number to reach me?”

He must have given the phone back to Helen because she answered. “He’s already gone, hon.” She paused and then whistled. “I’ve never seen him that mad.”

I was tired, and my whole body hurt. I didn’t have the energy to deal with Volkov’s anger on top of it. “Volkov’s always in a snit.”

“Not like this,” Helen said. “When he couldn’t track you, he came here. He threatened us if we didn’t tell him where you were, and he wouldn’t believe us when we said we didn’t know.”

I sucked in a breath. “He threatened you?”

“He said he’d turn me in for making moonshine!” Alyce yelled from the background. “The damn feds would have taken my still.”

“And he told me he’d stick me in an old folks’ home,” Helen added. “Can you believe that?” Instead of sounding angry, she sounded impressed.

“I’m sorry.”

“Pfffft. Don’t worry about it. But tell me you’re alright, hon.”

“I’m fine,” I assured her. *Dead broke and in the sights of a murderous werewolf but otherwise just dandy.* I wasn’t willing to add to her worries by saying that part out loud though. We said our goodbyes, and I settled in to wait for my ride.

By the time Volkov’s Audi pulled up in front of the building, I was sitting on a bench in the dark. The library had been closed for hours. I quickly zipped my jacket up to my

neck to hide the bruising on my throat. I healed fast, but it would be a few hours before the demon's souvenir faded.

Volkov parked and got out of the car. Based on his expression as he stalked toward me, the drive had done little to cool his anger. Instead of his customary business clothes, he was dressed down in dark-washed jeans and a snug gray t-shirt. His face was haggard, and his dark hair mussed like he'd been dragging his fingers through it.

"Why are you sitting out here?" he demanded.

"Because libraries don't stay open like 24-hour grocery stores," I joked, trying to lighten the mood and failing spectacularly. I stood up and stretched my stiff calves.

Before I could bend down to grab my duffle, Volkov yanked me against his chest and wrapped his arms around me. "I thought you were dead." If I hadn't been so close, I wouldn't have heard him. The pulse against my cheek was erratic.

My apology was muffled by his t-shirt. We stood like that for several minutes. Pressed against the solid warmth of his body, the familiar smell of cedarwood and spice grounded me. I wrapped my arms around his waist and sighed. Gradually, all the tension bled from my body as I leaned into his embrace. For the first time in weeks, I felt safe.

It would be so easy to let him take care of me. That thought terrified me. Volkov wasn't Carl, but he'd still smother me if I let him until there was nothing left of me. He wouldn't do it with violence, but the result would be the same. I disentangled myself from his embrace.

His hands remained gripping my upper arms. "Five hours."

"What?"

"It's a five-hour drive back to Kansas City. That's how long you have to explain what the fuck is going on." Volkov released his hold on me, grabbed my bag, and strode back to his car to open the passenger side. When I was seated, he leaned in. "Anything I should know now?"

I bit my lip debating. "I bumped into Carl."

A growl rattled his chest. “What did he do?”

“It’s not what he did so much as what he will do if he catches up with us.” I touched my still splinted wrist without thinking, inadvertently drawing Volkov’s eye to it.

He lifted it gently. “He did this?” His voice was low and more dangerous for it.

“Not exactly.” I figured it best to save the demon encounter for a peppy drive-time talk. Hopefully by then, some of the rage he was channeling would lessen. I pulled my wrist back into my lap. “But I may have kicked him in the face,” I admitted. When Volkov’s eyebrows shot up, I added, “twice.” I grimaced when I remembered the look on Carl’s face as he drove away. “I caught him unaware, but he won’t let that happen again. If he catches us...”

“Oh, I hope he does.” Volkov’s teeth flashed right before he closed me in his car and prowled around to the driver’s side.

CHAPTER 30



The only thing worse than confessing to Max Volkov that I stole a magical dagger was telling Kali I lost it to a demon. Although Volkov hadn't been happy about my confession, he had taken it better than I'd anticipated. There had been minimal yelling. I suspected Volkov's rage at the men who had given me the mass of bruises and sprained wrist I was sporting tempered the anger that would normally be aimed my way. After making it back to Kansas City, Volkov had insisted I crash at his house so he could keep an eye on me. Because Carl was still gunning for me, I didn't argue.

By the time I woke up this morning, it was to a house full of people congregating for an emergency Tribunal meeting. Although I was relieved to finally have it all in the open, Kali's reaction was worrisome. The longer I talked, the more color drained from her face.

Kali cleared her throat. "I'd say we have more than a slight problem."

While it was possible to send a demon back to hell through a ritual, like the one we used for Zepar, demons were notoriously difficult to kill. Kali explained that the dagger I'd just lost was one of only two weapons capable of killing a demon. Thanks to my blunder, a powerful demon was loose and virtually unstoppable.

While the Tribunal members debated just how screwed we were, I kicked myself for my crap aim. If I had managed to stab the demon in the chest rather than nick his leg with a

demon-killing dagger, none of this would be a problem. Instead, he was now armed with that weapon.

I glanced at Volkov, who had poured himself a stiff drink. As the head of the Tribunal, he was ultimately responsible for cleaning up the mess I made. Despite me not being part of his pack, it had happened in his domain.

At this point, the only way to take the demon out was to get our hands on the only other weapon capable of killing one—a war scythe we’d discovered was slated to go up for auction by none other than Damien Creed. The thought of walking back into Creed’s orbit was about as appealing as a lobotomy. But I got us into this mess, so I needed to do my part to get us out of it.

I took a breath to steady my nerves and squared my shoulders. I could still fix this. “We find the auction location, and I’ll steal it out from under his nose.” I’d done it once with the Alatyr stone, I could do it again. Volkov started to object, but I cut him off. “Are you going to steal it?”

I scanned him from the tips of his polished dress shoes to his broad shoulders that strained the expensive suit jacket he’d donned for this meeting. He might dominate a room like this, but we were talking about a world with rules he didn’t understand. Stealing was in my blood. If anyone could get that war scythe, it was me. I may have lost the dagger, but I’d successfully stolen it first.

Volkov glared at me. “Fine, but I’m going with you.”

“Fine.”

Having him guarding my back would be nice. As long as he followed my lead, we’d be golden. I eyed the amber spark in his eyes and the determined set to his jaw. If necessary, I could always ditch him and go after it myself, but I wanted him to have enough faith in me that we could do this together.

I reached out to a couple contacts who operated in Creed’s circle to put feelers out. Levon wasn’t one of them. Within a few hours, I had a meet set up with one of them. My contact was understandably skittish and wasn’t willing to disclose the

auction location over the phone. Instead, I'd be meeting one of his associates who lived near Kansas City.

Because spotting the local alpha was a surefire way to send my source to ground, Volkov grudgingly agreed to let me go to the meet alone.

Once I had an address in Flagstaff, he insisted on driving me himself. I didn't argue. Since we planned to leave in the morning, I insisted on spending the night in my own apartment so I could pack. I called Dez on the way and asked him to meet me there. I dreaded telling him that I lost our golden ticket, but I wouldn't put it off.

Dez was sitting on my apartment stairs when I arrived. He looked gaunt, with dark circles under his eyes.

I put a hand on my hip. "You need blood."

He nodded miserably. "I didn't have much of an appetite with you out there on your own."

My guilt amplified. I punched in the new security code and invited him inside, pointing at the lava lamp. Dez took care of the bug Nash Mitchell put in my apartment while I mixed him a Bloody Mary using the leftover blood still in my fridge from our movie night. I waited until he drained the glass and then made him another before womaning up.

"I lost the dagger, Dez." I hung my head as I told him about my run-in with the demon. When he didn't say a word, I babbled on, telling him I was leaving in the morning to go after the war scythe. "When I get back, I'll kiss Hopper's ass, so he'll give me my old job back. It'll take me awhile to pay back what your cut would've been, but I swear to you, I will do everything in my power to make this right."

I chanced a glance at Dez. The color had returned to his cheeks, and the shadows under his eyes had faded. But it was the look on his face that caused the catch in my throat. His eyes glimmered with unshed tears. "I'm so sorry, Dez."

He demonstrated that famed vampire speed, grabbing me and pulling me into a hug before I even saw him reach for me.

“I don’t care about the money, Riley. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“But you lost everything when your dick of a partner screwed you out of your company. You needed that money as much as I did.” My voice wobbled.

Dez awkwardly patted me on the back before leaning away to meet my eyes. “I don’t need the money, Riley. I had plenty of stocks outside my company.”

I frowned in confusion. “If you didn’t need the money, why would you help me steal a dagger and drive to bumfuck Oklahoma to sell it?”

Dez stared at his empty glass for a long time. “I didn’t have any reason to live before you.” He held a finger to my lips when I started to argue. “No. It’s true. When I lost my company, I turned into a shell of myself. I put everything into that company, Riley. And when I lost it, I didn’t know what to do with myself.” His eyes turned red, and his fangs descended. “Not only did my partner steal my company, he cursed me to live like this.”

I nudged him with my shoulder. “Vampires aren’t all bad. You’re pretty awesome for a bloodsucker.”

He managed a sad smile before looking away. “I planned to end my life, you know. The first night I wandered into the Sundowner and sat on one of your barstools. I planned to go home and do it, but I wanted one last drink first.” He looked at me with shame.

“Oh, Dez.” My heart ached for him. As shitty as my life with Carl had been, there hadn’t been a single day when I thought about giving up. There was a fire in my belly that made me a survivor, and I hated that Dez’s had flickered out—even if briefly.

He sat up straighter and patted my knee. “You saved me.” When I opened my mouth to object, he shook his head. “No. You did.” He grew quiet, staring out my window at the night sky. “People think you have to stage some big intervention to save someone. But sometimes it’s the little things that drag

you out of the darkness—a brush of a hand when you’re feeling alone, the distraction of a betting game in a dive bar.” He grabbed my hand and cradled it in front of his chest. “A new friend who drags you into situations that remind you you’re alive.”

I didn’t try to stop the tears that rolled down my cheeks. I let him see all of it—my grief for what he’d almost done, my fear at facing a man who nearly broke me when I was a kid, my pain at the prospect of leaving any of the people I loved behind. I let Dez see it all because those were things that bonded us. I needed him to know he wasn’t alone in his fear or pain or grief.

“I’m glad you came into the bar that night.” I squeezed his hand until his knuckles cracked in my grip. Then, I smiled and put us back on lighter ground. “It even makes putting up with Hopper’s B.S. worth it.”

Dez cleared his throat, grabbed his car keys, and hauled me to my feet.

“Where are we going?” I asked as he pulled me out the door.

“I need to pack if we’re going to Flagstaff to pull off another heist.” He looked over his shoulder and waggled his bushy red eyebrows at me. “I stocked up on some tech gadgets since our last one.”

I grinned. Volkov was going to absolutely freak when he found out Dez was riding shotgun, and I was so here for it.

CHAPTER 31



Dez and I stopped at Helen's house for a weepy reunion. Helen loaded us up with her special potion magic bombs. Alyce handed us each a pint jar full of moonshine to handle being stuck in a car with Volkov. She was obviously still holding a grudge over his threat to turn her into the feds. We took everything with a smile.

As soon as we got to the street where Dez had parked his tiny smart car, I took both of our jars and dumped them into the storm drain. "Trust me. You are not ready for Alyce's moonshine."

Volkov was already outside when we arrived at his house the next morning. Instead of his Audi, he was loading his designer suitcase into a black Mercedes SUV with Massachusetts plates. I handed him my duffle bag and tapped the license. "Stolen plates. I'm impressed."

"Most women would be impressed by the Mercedes," he said dryly.

"Haven't you figured it out yet, wolf?" I winked. "I'm not most women."

His eyes heated as they locked on mine. "No. You're not."

Dez remained in the car until our banter died down, but now he cleared his throat loudly enough to snag Volkov's attention.

"Thanks for giving her a ride," Volkov told him with a polite smile. His friendly demeanor died when Dez asked him where he should park his car and cheerfully announced he was

going with us. Dez didn't back down even when Volkov threatened to crush his car like an empty pop can. When he realized it wasn't a battle he was going to win, Volkov grabbed his garage door remote and opened one of the bays. "Pull it in there."

I smirked at Volkov. "You don't want anyone to drive by and think you drive that little car, do you?"

He grunted.

After Dez parked, he wheeled over two full-size suitcases. "One is equipment," he grumbled defensively when Volkov gave him crap for packing like a teenage girl.

I was still smiling when I climbed into the backseat of the SUV. If they were already sniping at each other, this trip was guaranteed to be scrapbook worthy. Instead of sitting in the front with Volkov, Dez squeezed in the back with me.

After begging Volkov to stop for snacks and promising not to get anything on the upholstery, he pulled into a truck stop. Dez lugged an armful of chips and candy to the counter. Volkov snatched the full-sized bag of Cheetos and put them back without a word. *Probably for the best.*

I picked up a tub of Vaseline, a pack of cinnamon gum, and a roll of heavy-duty tape and waited for the cashier to finish ringing Dez up. Volkov took everything out of my hands—gum included—and added it to the haul. Then, he paid for all of it with a credit card before Dez could hand over his cash.

When we stepped outside, Volkov pushed his key fob to unlock his car doors. "I need to make a call." He already had his phone to his ear and was striding away from the building before Dez or I could react.

Dez and I climbed in the backseat with our stash. When it looked like Volkov's phone call wasn't going to be a quick one, Dez turned to me. "So, I looked into those financial transactions you asked me to."

On the way to Oklahoma, I'd told Dez about the mysterious bank deposits that allowed Carl to step into the

Santa Fe alpha position and asked Dez if he could find out where they originated from.

“What did you find?” Without a rare magical dagger to pad my bank account, I hoped discovering who bankrolled Carl’s power grab could give me the leverage I needed to kick him out of my life for good. When he raked his fingers through his mop of red hair, my stomach pitched. “Dez?”

He glanced at the building to make sure Volkov was still occupied. “Every transaction originated from the same bank account.”

I nodded because that much I already knew.

Dez sighed as if he didn’t want to drop a bomb on me. “That bank account belonged to Damien Creed.”

Everything I thought I knew about Carl tilted with that piece of information. I had no idea why Creed would want Carl in the position of alpha. All I knew was that I had to keep digging until I found out. The fact that Carl ripped off the man who held his purse strings could be the leverage I needed. I just needed to figure out how to wield it without bringing Damien Creed’s wrath down on my head for stealing the stone for Carl.

“You okay?” Dez asked.

I nodded. Volkov’s door opening interrupted the conversation. I couldn’t afford to let Carl derail another job, so I shoved the bombshell to the back of my mind to examine later.

Dez and I spent most of the trip talking about the new super spy equipment he’d brought along while eating candy until we both had stomachaches. I tried to coax Volkov into eating gummy bears, but he stubbornly refused to even try them. All he touched was the fancy bottle of water he brought from home.

We arrived in Flagstaff two days before the underground-market auction, which gave us plenty of time to scout the location. The auction was being held in an abandoned factory on the outskirts of the city. Thanks to digitalized public

records, Dez was able to pull up building blueprints—both the originals and those that accompanied the building permit required for Creed’s remodel. The onsite vault he’d had installed was helpfully labeled as were all the air ducts and exits.

With the cash Volkov brought along, we were also able to bribe two of the catering staff into giving us the planned schedule for the night along with their uniforms and name badges. Dez put his handy dandy compulsion skills to good use to erase their memories of the exchange and to direct them to stay home from work without alerting their boss.

From one of the auction staff, we also learned the protocol for the auction. None of the items would be on site until the morning of the auction, which meant security prior to auction day would be lax at worst, nonexistent if we were lucky. During the event, each item would be brought out on a catering cart draped with white fabric to obscure the item. The carts would be wheeled out approximately ten minutes prior to being auctioned off and then returned promptly to the vault after the winning bid was awarded.

Only Creed and his head of security knew the order of the items to be sold prior to them leaving the vault. The next item up for bid was announced prior to opening the bidding on the current item on stage. Successful bidders were required to transfer payment and wait until the end of the auction to accept possession of the magical artifacts they won. The vault would be locked down during the event except for when items were removed or returned and for thirty minutes following bidding to ensure only security and those awarded a winning bid were on the premises when it was reopened.

At most, we had a fifteen-minute window to steal the war scythe. Most of that time, the scythe would be on a covered cart in a crowded auction room. Every cart had a guard assigned to transport it to and from the vault. Because the war scythe was a high-dollar item, it was sure to have one of Creed’s more experienced—and dangerous—guards assigned to it.

Our best intel came courtesy of a disgruntled witch who had been part of Creed's security team before getting fired that morning. Volkov used alpha command to get a laundry list of security features. Then, Dez compelled her to forget she ever saw us.

From the witch's intel, it was clear that Creed had leveled up his security since I stole the chip of the Alatyr stone from his house in Santa Fe eight years ago. He now employed several witches to ward the vault so that only a select few guards could open it. He also employed a large contingent of armed security guards—mostly vampires with a few shifters thrown in for their brawn and noses. They would be stationed at all doors and in the auction hall.

Auction attendees would go through a three-point check-in process to make it through the front door. First up was a manual search. Creed's security guards would inspect all purses and pat down all guests. Next, everyone would pass through a metal detector to ensure no weapons made it inside. Finally, everyone would take a magical oath that ensured they would abide by Creed's auction rules. Those rules included remaining in designated areas only, not disclosing the location of the auction to anyone not in attendance, and not revealing the identities of the other bidders.

With each piece of information, I buzzed with anticipation. The more barriers, the bigger the adrenaline rush I'd get from besting them. Some people did Sudoku puzzles. I got my high from finding and exploiting security gaps. And there were always gaps. Some were just easier than others to identify.

Volkov grew increasingly agitated while Dez and I finalized a plan the day before the heist. As Dez and I got ready for our recon mission, Volkov paced the tight confines of the motel room where we'd set up camp.

Although Volkov had argued for going with me, there was no way he could stuff that big body of his into the normal-sized catering uniforms we'd scored. After a lot of blustering, Volkov grudgingly caved. Dez and I were going inside that building this morning dressed in our borrowed catering uniforms.

Our goal was threefold. First, we needed to cover as much ground as we could to ensure the actual layout matched the building blueprints. Second, we needed to scout out any security measures the staff might have left out. Lastly, we needed to smuggle in our comms links while security was still lax. Although they were the size of a pencil erasers and fit snugly enough in our ears that they'd be virtually invisible to casual observers, we couldn't risk wearing them through security on auction day.

To help us case the location, Dez outfitted both of us with his new super spy glasses. Even with the built-in video cameras and touch technology recording, they looked like normal glasses. His were identical to his regular, black-rimmed glasses. Mine made me look like the kind of woman who cheerfully invited everyone she knew to a multi-level marketing party.

As the designated shopper yesterday, I had picked out a dirty blond wig with a man bun for Dez and a dark braided wig for myself. After going heavy on the bronzer, I popped in a pair of brown contacts and the powder-blue glasses Dez brought for me. I surveyed my makeover in the dresser mirror. The uniform was loose-fitting enough that I was able to wear padding underneath, giving me enough curves that my body was as unrecognizable as my face.

Satisfied, I turned to Dez. "Are you ready, Robin?"

Dez bristled and pointed to himself. "I'm Batman."

I rolled my eyes. "You are the sidekick in this scenario. I'm the lead."

"Hello. Vampire here," he argued, framing his face with open palms. "Obviously, I'm Batman." Dez walked to the mirror to look over my shoulder, his new man bun bobbing as he came.

We both started laughing, which in turn, earned an irritated snarl from Volkov who was still pacing the room like a caged predator. I watched as Volkov's body language grew more agitated by the second.

When I couldn't take it anymore, I stepped into his path and put a hand on his arm. "It's going to be fine, Max. I know what I'm doing."

"I know you think you do," he said.

"But you don't," I snapped.

His arm tensed beneath my hand. I jerked my hand back as if burned, but he caught my wrist. "I don't like the risks."

Volkov might not have come right out and said it, but his message was clear. He didn't think I could pull this off. I tugged my hand loose. This time, he let go.

I didn't waste my breath trying to convince him. A man like Volkov had to see it for himself to believe it. With access to our video feeds, I was about to show him exactly what I could do. *Maybe he'll finally see beyond this bubble-wrapped version of me stuck in his head.* "We'll be in and out before the hired guns arrive," I assured him, a tendril of anticipation rising in my chest.

Volkov snatched the car keys from the dresser and stalked outside, leaving the motel room door swinging on its hinges. Dez and I exchanged a look before following him out to the car. We kept our commentary to a minimum for the drive. Volkov stopped the SUV a block away like we'd agreed. I leaned over the front seat to check my wig.

He met my eyes in the mirror, barely leashed anger simmering beneath the surface.

"Don't say it again," I warned him.

Max Volkov wasn't a man used to being left behind while others waded into danger, but this wasn't the time for second guessing. We had a job to do, and I was the only one of us with the experience to see it done. I slid out of the car and shut the door before he could voice any of the doubts hardening that granite jaw.

CHAPTER 32



There was only one vampire I was willing to share my personal space with, and it wasn't the one who'd just knocked me off my feet. By the time I noticed him, it was too late. While Dez had been across the room planting our comms, I'd ventured closer to the hallway that led to the vault. I hadn't been cautious enough to see the vampire come around the corner. He hadn't even slowed as he barreled right into me. It was like walking into a cement wall.

Despite having been in his house while he slept, this was the first time I'd been close enough to Damien Creed to notice the cruel twist of his lips and the bloodlust lurking in his eyes. None of the photographs of this man did justice to the sheer terror he inspired with a simple glance. This was no soft-bellied collector. He was tall and built for violence. With his long white hair and model cheekbones, Damien Creed was death wrapped in a pretty package.

Creed scanned my catering uniform with obvious distaste before grabbing my shoulders to shove my body away from him. He stared at his hands as if working class was contagious. Creed turned to the guard next to him and snapped his fingers. The guard handed him a pressed white handkerchief, and Creed wiped his palms on it.

"Watch where you're going or next time there will be consequences," Creed said blandly

"What are you looking at, girl?" the guard at his side asked. "Show some respect."

I swallowed past my fear and dropped my gaze to the floor. When the men didn't immediately move away, I glanced up at them through my lashes. Creed watched me with a tilted head.

I caught sight of Dez cutting across the room to get to me, and I gave my head a slight shake. "Sorry," I whispered, using the soft tone I'd reserved for living with Carl.

Creed said nothing, just kept studying me like a butterfly pinned to a board. Only years of practice slowing my heartbeat and steadying my breathing kept me from panicking. This was the man who bankrolled Carl. And this was the man I'd robbed at Carl's request. With that one look into his eyes, I knew if he had any inkling who I was, death would be something I begged for.

Creed's hired muscle tapped the oversized comm link in his ear. "Sir, the car's here." They left without sparing me another glance, assuring me that Creed had not recognized me. *To him, the help probably all looks the same.* It's not like he so much as glanced at my very visible name tag.

Dez was by my side the minute they stepped away, but I didn't breathe easier until both men had left through the front door. Dez looked over his shoulder at the door to make sure Creed was really gone. He grabbed my hand. "We need to go."

"First, we get what we came for." Dez looked like he wanted to argue, but I shut him down. "Do you have it?"

Dez sighed but slipped the compact device from his pocket to mine. "Fine, but for the record, I think sticking around is a bad idea."

"Relax. Creed's gone now." I cupped the device in my palm and pulled it out far enough to examine it. "How does this thing work?"

"All you have to do is get close to the access card you want to clone and press the button."

"Sweet." I tucked it back into my uniform pocket. "How close are we talking?"

“According to the specs, anything less than a foot should do it, but to be safe, the closer the better.”

“Got it. You circle this room and get it on film. I’ll take care of the rest.” I adjusted my glasses up my nose. Then, I headed for the single guard watching over the catering staff as they bustled around the room setting up tables and chairs. I palmed the device in one hand while waving in the general direction of the catering staff. When I reached the guard, I bumped into him, knocking the clipboard he held out of his hands.

“I’m so sorry,” I mumbled, bending down along with him.

Unlike Creed, this guard merely grunted as we both reached for the clipboard. While he was focused on snatching the clipboard out of my right hand, I brushed the device in my left hand across the access card dangling from the lanyard around his beefy neck. I straightened and gave the guard a sunny smile he ignored.

I waited until the guard was across the room with his back to me before stepping into the hallway that led to vault. The access door to the vault was halfway down the hall. After pressing my ear against the door to listen for movement, I tapped the cloning device to the keypad and watched the green bar light up. I made a mental note to plant a big, fat kiss on Dez’s cheek when we got out of here.

The vault itself boasted an old-fashioned steel-reinforced door with a mechanical lock. I was in luck because I’d broken into a vault just like this as a teen. My fingers itched to test my skills, but since I was here for recon, I settled for scanning the entire area with my video-enhanced glasses.

By the time I made it back to the main room, Dez was finished with his job and waiting for me near the front door. I grabbed a bag of trash near the catering staff and carried it with me as I sauntered out the door Dez held open.

Volkov didn’t say a word when we climbed in the backseat, but I knew from the dark look he shot me that I’d be getting an earful when we returned to the motel. In the

meantime, I unpinned the wig and shook my hair free before holding my hand up for a high-five from Dez.

“You killed it in there,” I told him with a grin. “And this little number?” I kissed the cloning device before handing it over.

“It worked?” Dez asked.

“Without a hitch.”

Dez rustled around in his tech stash until he came up with a generic key fob. I watched as he held it to the device to transfer the key code I’d cloned onto the fob. In a matter of seconds, he tossed it to me.

I twirled it around my finger. “Brilliant.”

The setup crew member we’d interrogated yesterday hadn’t said anything about the guards confiscating everyone’s keys. As long as they let me keep this on me, getting past the access door would be a breeze. If they did take it, I’d lift another card and hope the owner didn’t notice it missing until I was long gone.

“What about the vault?” Dez asked. “How long will it take to crack it?”

“Worst case, twenty minutes, but it’s basic enough I think I can get inside in ten.”

Dez whistled. “Damn.”

Volkov stomped on the brakes hard enough the seat belt cut into my shoulder when he stopped in front of the motel. “Inside,” he barked.

Dez gave me a worried look, but I shrugged it off. I wasn’t going to let Volkov’s surliness ruin the high of a job well done. “Might as well get it over with,” I said.

Volkov was already staring at the blueprints Dez taped to the wall when we joined him inside. “We’re doing it my way.”

“We’re doing what your way?” I asked.

“The job.”

“I don’t think so,” I countered. “Don’t forget. Getting in that vault is in my skillset, not yours.”

“This isn’t some strip mall safe deposit place or a small-town museum, Riley.” He pointed at the scribbled notes spilled across the small table in the room. “There will be armed fucking guards in there tomorrow. Even if you managed to get past all of them, you’ll never make it to the vault. You have to take a magical oath to stay in the designated areas, or did you forget? That means your only option is to take it while it’s wheeled into the auction.” He may not have been in wolf form, but his hackles were definitely up. “No way you can steal the scythe while it’s in a room full of supernaturals, all of whom could rip you in two.”

I mentally counted to ten and willed my rising anger down. Volkov was worried. I got that. He’d just had to sit by and watch via camera feed while Creed knocked me on my butt and studied me like I might make a great midnight snack.

I did my best to keep my voice reasonable. “Dez and I think that the oath might not be binding for me. I’m immune to compulsion and alpha commands, and we suspect that a magical oath will be the same,” I theorized.

“That’s a big fucking gamble.” Volkov’s wolf rose to the surface with his growing agitation. “It’s too dangerous.” He stepped around me and ripped the blueprint from the wall, wadded it in his fist, and tossed it into the motel trashcan. “We’re doing this another way.”

I threw up my hands. “What other way, Max? Dez and I have been working nonstop on this plan. It will work.” I took a breath and reached for his hands. “Listen to me. I can do this.”

His eyes bled full amber as he stared down at me. “No. You can’t.”

My throat tightened at his easy dismissal. He didn’t think I was capable of this. The words he threw at me that day in his library surfaced again. *Every shifter who isn’t capable of protecting themselves is my responsibility.* That’s still how he saw me—how he would always see me.

“There isn’t another option,” Dez said softly.

“There is.” Volkov moved close enough to Dez that he could look over his shoulder. He pointed to the open laptop. “Are you good enough to create a fake identity for me?”

Dez sighed. “Of course.”

“Good. As a member of the Tribunal, they’d never let me in the door as Maxim Volkov. But with a cover identity, I’ll walk right in and buy the damn thing outright.”

Dez stared at him.

“That war scythe is a demon relic,” I said. “Bidding will open at a hundred thousand at least. It will sell for millions.”

Volkov continued to stare at Dez’s computer screen instead of looking at me. “Then, I’ll spend millions, so we all walk out of here alive.”

“Money isn’t always the solution,” I argued.

“It is more often than not,” he countered.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to stop myself from hurling a shoe at his obstinate head. *I should’ve ditched him when I had the chance and done this job on my terms.* When I opened my eyes again, I saw the look on Dez’s face. “You agree with him?” I couldn’t help the stab of betrayal I felt.

“Given your history with Creed,” he started.

At that, Volkov turned on me. “What history?”

I steeled my spine and laid my whole sordid past at his feet. I told him all of it—about the reason Carl took me in, about the jobs he sent me on, about the artifact I’d stolen from under Creed’s nose almost a decade ago. Although I’d told him what kind of alpha Carl had been on the way back from Oklahoma, this time I didn’t sugar coat my part in any of it. I needed him to see that I was more than capable of pulling this off.

When I was done, he sat on the bed beside me, staring at the wall where only the torn corners of the building blueprints

remained.

I cleared my throat. “I know I can do this because I’ve done it before.”

“You think I’m like him, that I’ll send you in there like he did?” Volkov’s voice shook with fury.

“You’re not sending me anywhere. It’s my choice.” One look at him, and I knew I hadn’t even cracked the surface.

His next words confirmed it. “It’s too dangerous. My way minimizes the risks.”

“Fine.” The word tasted sour on my tongue, but more was at stake than winning an argument. That war scythe was the only thing that would give Kali a fighting chance against a demon. We weren’t leaving without it, and if I had to swallow my pride and walk in there as arm candy while Volkov flaunted his money to get it, so be it. I looked at Dez. “Set up a fake identity for me as well.”

Volkov objected, but I talked right over him. “I either walk into that auction on your arm, or I’ll find my own way in.” He growled, and I narrowed my eyes. “Try me.”

He nodded curtly at Dez, then yanked his shirt over his head and left to go for a run. I watched Volkov go, the lump in my throat so big it threatened to choke me.

While Dez set up fake identities and Volkov ran off his emotions, I swiped the credit card out of the wallet Volkov left open on the dresser and went shopping. I splurged on an outrageously expensive wig, a sequined cocktail dress, a plethora of makeup I’d never wear again, and bedazzled heels that would make me almost as tall as Volkov. The cashiers didn’t even blink when I pulled out his Black Amex card to pay.

My arms were full when I climbed out of the taxi. Normally, I’d go for the budget ride share, but since I was feeling vindictive and Volkov was unknowingly paying, I went the expensive route. I even left a tip as big as the fare.

Volkov opened the motel door before I reached it and held it for me. “Feel better?”

My smile was tight. “Starting to.”

He took his credit card back without comment.

While I was out, Dez managed to create realistic looking fake IDs for both of us. He’d photoshopped a chic brunette bob on my photo as I’d requested. For the next hour, he briefed us on our stolen identities. Tonight, we would be Mr. Anthony and Mrs. Jacqueline Steele from Boston, Massachusetts.

Volkov frowned down at the picture on my new ID. “Are you sure you can pull this off?”

I waited until he looked at me to say what I should have said long ago. “You know the only other person that’s made me feel like you are right now?” I didn’t wait for him to answer. “Carl.” I grabbed the shopping bags from the bed beside him and locked myself in the bathroom.

CHAPTER 33



By the time I stepped out again, I'd traded the hurt for attitude. Volkov was already dressed in a tailored suit. He had his back to me as he talked to someone on his cell phone. He turned when I closed the bathroom door behind me. He snapped his phone closed without saying goodbye, his gaze traveling down my body and back up again.

I mimicked Meira's haughtiest look as he took me in. There was no trace of my usual pink-haired grunge style today. The cocktail dress I wore was silver and sparkled even under the harsh fluorescent motel lighting. It had a high neckline and full-length sleeves. Modest, however, it was not. The dress was form-fitting and skimmed my thighs.

As a runner, my toned legs were my second-best feature, and the four-inch heels made them look even better. The back of the cocktail dress was the real showstopper though. It was cut indecently low, and it hugged my ass like a second skin. I spun in a slow circle to make sure Volkov got the full effect.

With the brunette wig and the contoured makeup, I looked like a rich bitch version of myself. I snatched the fake ID from the table and held it up next to my face. "I do believe I pulled it off," I said in a posh accent.

"You know," he said, prowling closer. "You're going in there as my wife."

"So?"

He stepped into my personal space, but I stood my ground. "So, you'll need to sell a room full of supernaturals on it. Can

you?” He dropped his nose to the side of my neck and breathed in. “Because right now, you reek of anger. You’ll have to do better than that.”

I jerked away from him. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve had a lot of practice putting on a good show when I need to.”

I moved to the dresser and grabbed the matching purse I bought. It was both sparkly and roomy, which almost made it worth the absurd price tag. Not that I’d paid for it.

Even though the plan was to go in as bidders, I wouldn’t be walking in there empty handed. The key to getting tools through security was to pack everyday items that could be used in a pinch. I might not be able to get a putty knife past security, but a metal nail file wouldn’t raise any eyebrows even if it did end up confiscated. I also packed a few other dual-purpose beauty supplies, including a mirrored compact, a small jar of Vaseline, a handful of bobby pins, and a travel-size can of aerosol hairspray. Finally, I tossed in a roll of heavy-duty clear tape, a pack of cinnamon gum, and the key fob that held the cloned access card—just in case.

Volkov didn’t comment on my assortment. “Ready?”

I nodded and headed for the door. Because Volkov walked behind me, I put some extra sass in my walk. He opened the back passenger door and held out a hand to steady me.

When I placed my palm against his, he caressed my knuckles with his thumb. “For what it’s worth, I am sorry.”

I nodded. For a man like Volkov, control was the only response he had to manage his fear. I let it go. Neither of us could afford for anger to cloud our judgement right now. Too much was at stake.

Instead of releasing me once I was seated, Volkov lifted my fingers to his mouth and grazed his lips against the back of my hand. His gaze locked on mine as he straightened. I missed the warmth of his touch as soon as I pulled my hand back onto my lap.

Dez coughed and climbed in the front seat. “All set?”

“Let’s do this,” I said.

Since Volkov was now going inside with me, Dez was the designated driver tonight. He'd tricked out the back of the SUV with all of his electronic toys in case he needed to override the security cameras or kill the lights in order to get us out if things didn't go to plan. After dropping us off, he'd park on the side of the building where the caterers and set-up crew vehicles parked.

We were not the last to arrive but pretty close to it. Thanks to Dez's hacking skills, Mr. Anthony and Mrs. Jacqueline Steele were on the guest list.

Volkov and I made it through the checkpoints with only a minor incident. When the security guard checking the contents of my purse lifted the roll of heavy-duty clear tape out, the guard stiffened like he'd just discovered a loaded gun.

I leaned in close. "It's to keep the girls in place," I whispered, dropping my gaze to my chest.

His cheeks flushed, and I winked at him. He dropped the tape back in my purse. The guard handed my purse back to me without a word, nail file included.

When we reached the oath part of the check-in, a witch held out an electronic tablet for our signatures and thumb prints. Once we cleared security, I moved toward the mounted fire extinguisher where Dez had stashed our comm links yesterday.

Volkov grabbed my wrist and spun me back to him, bracing an arm around my waist. He glared down at me. "What are you doing?"

I brushed imaginary lint from the shoulder of his jacket and smiled up at him. "Getting the comm links."

He tightened his arm. "It's too risky."

"It's less risky to have them," I argued.

A tic formed in his jaw, but he finally nodded.

After retrieving them, I hooked a hand around the back of his neck and pulled his head to mine. The kiss was enough of a smoke show that I was able to slip the comm in his ear without

drawing attention to it. Volkov held me a moment longer, so I could test the audio.

“If only Dez could see us now,” I said.

Dez’s snort came through loud and clear. “Oh, I’ve hacked into the security feed, so I’ve got eyes on the room. Trust me, I’ve seen more than enough of you two. Now, stop putting on a show and get to work before you turn me into a voyeur.”

“Yes, sir.”

Volkov pulled me closer with a wicked grin. “I like the sound of that.”

I rolled my eyes and pushed away. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

Volkov tucked my hand on his arm before walking to the bar. While he ordered us martinis, I gave Dez an eyeful of the high rollers in the room.

Drinks in hand, Volkov led me to open aisle seats halfway back from the stage. He waited until I was seated to hand me my martini. As my nerves hit overdrive, I was tempted to drink it. I settled for the olive.

Because more than Volkov was watching me, I wrapped my lips around the skewer and pulled the olive off with my teeth. His eyes glinted with amusement. Not to be outdone, he rested his arm around my shoulders and bent his head to press a kiss against the side of my neck. I scanned the crowd to distract myself, choking on the olive when I spotted a familiar face. This time, it wasn’t Damien Creed.

It was worse. Standing next to the stage was Creed’s head of security. *Diablo*. That wasn’t his real name, but it was the moniker I gave the puma shifter who almost busted me the last time I ripped off Creed. Tonight’s version of me was a far cry from the sixteen-year-old who ran into him, but he was still a man who’d seen my face, heard my voice, and smelled my scent. I hoped my disguise and the heavy dose of expensive perfume I wore would be enough to fool him.

Volkov patted my back until I forced the olive down and regained my composure. “Are you okay?” he whispered, his

earlier smolder replaced with concern.

“Uh huh.”

Volkov tracked my gaze to the scarred guard with the sandy blond hair and don't-fuck-with-me stance. “You know him?”

I cleared my throat and took a sip of my drink. “It was a long time ago. I was just a kid, and I only had a brief interaction with him. I doubt he'd recognize me.” I hoped that was true. “But we should split up in case I'm wrong.”

Volkov grabbed my arm and held me in the chair. “We should stay together.”

“We can't risk your cover if he recognizes me. We'll split up and reconnect after you've won the bid.”

Volkov loosened his grip but didn't let go. “And if he detains you?”

“Then, you'll get me out,” I said calmly. “After you get the war scythe.”

He didn't like it, but he knew I was right. As soon as his hand dropped, I stood and moved to an empty chair on the opposite side of the room. Although I could feel Volkov's gaze on me, I didn't look at him. The auction started a few minutes later, and Volkov redirected his attention to the main event.

Eventually, the auctioneer announced a war scythe rumored to be a demon relic that had belonged to one of the world's oldest vampires before he had been killed. I scanned the room for Creed, wondering if he'd been the one to kill the previous owner. Not seeing him, I straightened in my seat and peered at the carts being wheeled to the stage. From the way the fabric draped, it was easy to pick out the cart that held our target.

The scythe itself had a wicked blade that shone as if it had just been polished and a long handle worn smooth from handling. Bidding started at half a million dollars. If Volkov was nervous, he hid it like a pro. He let the bidding hit two million dollars before he raised his number. When it hit five million, I gaped at the ease with which he bid. It was an

exorbitant amount of money, but Volkov wore an expression of mild interest as if he routinely blew millions of dollars without a thought. *Maybe he did.*

By this point, the time between bids had lengthened. I held my breath as I waited for the other bidder to give up. *Max was right. This way is a lot easier. Less fun, but easier.*

When no one else raised a number, I shot Volkov a satisfied smile. Right as the auctioneer was about to award the winning bid, Diablo stalked on stage to whisper in his ear. When he finished, Diablo's eyes skimmed the crowd. I did my best to remain calm as they touched on me, but there was no flicker of recognition on his face.

The auctioneer frowned at Volkov, and my stomach pitched. *Oh no.* Two armed guards stepped to either side of Volkov and waited for him to stand. Each guard took an arm and began to march him toward the side door behind me.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the last bid has been disqualified. Number forty-six is the winning bid at four and a half million dollars. Congratulations," the auctioneer announced.

The guard in charge of the scythe draped the white cloth back over the weapon and wheeled it past the stage. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* My heart rate spiked. If I didn't do something in the next five minutes, we could kiss that war scythe goodbye. With what was at stake if we lost it, that wasn't an option.

I had the key fob, so I could get to the vault at least, but with Volkov's cover blown, I didn't want to wait until the thirty-minute lockdown to break into the vault like Dez and I had originally planned. Now that Volkov was compromised, sooner or later, the guards would come looking for the woman who walked in on his arm. *I guess I'm winging it.*

I wished we'd worn those handy camera glasses from yesterday, so Dez could keep an eye on where they took Volkov. Ultimately, we'd decided they were too risky to try to get through security, so we'd left them in the SUV. I couldn't even tell Dez what was going on since talking to myself was guaranteed to draw attention I couldn't afford. For now, at least, I was on my own.

Several people stood up to rubberneck at the commotion around Volkov. They gave me the cover I needed. Because I'd sat on the side of the stage where the already auctioned items waited to be returned to the vault, I stood and moved to the aisle. I glanced at Volkov who was flanked by two guards who had paused to talk into their comms. I scanned the room and didn't spot Creed, so I assumed that's who they were talking to.

Volkov caught my eye and flicked his gaze toward the door. He mouthed, "on three."

I shook my head and then tilted it toward the covered cart, hoping he'd get the idea. *He definitely did.* The man looked like he was about to get an aneurism.

I'd be damned if we left empty-handed though. I popped a piece of cinnamon gum in my mouth to settle my jitters.

After a second, Volkov gave me a slight nod. Then, he did something I hadn't expected. He threw his head back into one of the guard's noses while elbowing him in the gut. Without missing a beat, he twisted the other guard's arm behind his back and yelled enough obscenities that all eyes were on him. The men guarding the carts rushed into the fray to help take Volkov to the ground. Volkov didn't stop fighting even at the bottom of the pile. He was giving me an opening, and I wasn't about to waste it.

I just hoped he wasn't hurt in the melee. Once Volkov told the guards who he was, he'd probably get a slap on the wrist and an escort out of town. At least, I had to believe that, or I wouldn't have the nerve to do what needed to be done.

I tucked my impractical heels in my purse and edged my way behind the cart. After checking to be sure no one was looking, I dropped to my knees. If someone moved to the other side and looked down, they'd spot me. But it was the best I could do.

The space under the cart was too small for a human, so I shifted. I didn't bother fighting my way out of the cocktail dress since I'd need it later. I ducked under the fabric with my

purse held in my mouth. As a goat, I fit easily in the cramped space.

A booming male voice cut through the crowd's chatter. "Lock everything up." After yesterday's run-in, Creed's voice was easily recognizable. The cart I was on began to move, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

If my guard pulled this cloth off to inspect the scythe once he had it in the vault, I would have to get the jump on him to make it out of here in one piece. With more than one guard, I was probably screwed.

The ride to the vault was the longest of my life. Every stop we made, I worried I'd be discovered. Every bump of the wheel made me wonder whether the cloth would snag and expose me. I waited for a magical zap as we moved away from the main room. Nothing happened, proving our theory that the magical oath was far from iron-clad for me. Because the cloth draped almost to the floor, I couldn't see anything, so I had to focus on my other senses to judge where we were. I counted the steps of the guards, walking single file down the enclosed hall.

I heard the vault door being opened, followed by the silence of thick concrete walls all around me. I waited until I heard the door click shut again before peeking under the open side of the cart. All I could see was an identical cart next to it. I waited several more seconds, listening intently for any sound before rolling off the cart. As silently as I could, I climbed off the cart. Assured I was alone, I shifted back to human and pulled my dress over my head.

I uncovered the war scythe and tested the weight of it in my hands. I swung it in a practice arc to see how well I could wield it. *Not well.* Hopefully, my escape wouldn't come down to me using it. I took a deep breath. Getting in the vault was much easier than smuggling a giant weapon out of it.

First things first. I searched for the emergency lever to open the vault door from the inside. There was no emergency exit. *Not good. Not good at all.* When the blueprints showed a

custom-built vault, it never occurred to me that the customization was to ensure there was no way out.

“Dez? Can you hear me?” I tried the comms, but there wasn’t even static. The thick steel-reinforced concrete walls made the inside of the vault a dead zone.

My only way out would be to wait for the next round of guards returning artifacts to the vault. I checked my watch. I had seven minutes, give or take. *Think.*

The guards always moved artifacts in pairs, probably because Creed didn’t trust anyone but him to be alone in the vault. That meant I had to incapacitate two guards long enough to get the war scythe out of here. If I could lure them inside with me, all I’d need to do was get past them long enough to slam the vault door shut.

Because the next artifacts the guards would bring were the final items on the auction, it meant a thirty-minute lockdown would follow. Hopefully, that would be more than enough time for me to smuggle the war scythe out of the building.

I had two major obstacles. The most obvious was that getting the jump on two supernatural guards long enough to make a run for the door wouldn’t be easy. There was also the matter of them recognizing my face. If they somehow made it out of the vault before I was off the premises, they’d be able to ID me easily. Even if I did make an escape, I wasn’t thrilled with them giving Creed a detailed description of me.

I needed a disguise. It didn’t have to even be a good one. It just had to hide my face. I reached for the white cloth that had been draped over the war scythe and rummaged around on the other carts until I came up with a skinny dagger. After using it to cut two holes in the fabric, I threaded my arms through them. Then, I cut two more holes, so I could see. I laughed, imagining the guards describing Casper the Ghost to Creed.

My odds of getting past those guards depended on both my ability to find weapons and the element of surprise. A prolonged fight with two guards would not end in my favor. I searched the carts for anything I could use. While I kept the

dagger as a last resort, I hoped I could make it out of here without actually killing anyone.

When I found a small statue with some heft to it, I grinned. *If Bea and Alyce were here, they'd be cackling right now.* I added the gilded statue to my makeshift arsenal near the door. Then, I leaned the war scythe against the entry wall, so it would be easy to grab.

I scooped some Vaseline into my hand and smeared a thin film over the middle of the floor, leaving the two feet in front of the door slip-free for my escape. Uncapping the hairspray, I stood against the wall next to the vault door. All that was left to do was to wait. Each minute stretched into the next until I was sure that no one was coming. When I finally heard the vault door creaking open, I flattened my back to the wall and prepared to attack.

Even dressed as a ghost, my aim was good. The stream of hairspray nailed the first guard right in the face. While he frantically rubbed his eyes, I braced my foot on his ass and shoved. As soon as his feet met the Vaseline-slicked floor, they flew out from under him. He hit the floor with a harsh thud. I winced. That had to hurt.

Unfortunately, the second guard was ready for the hairspray and batted it from my hands. I ducked as he swung at me and grabbed the fertility statue at my feet. I drove the statue of a golden god sporting a seriously impressive erection straight up, catching the guard under the chin. His head snapped back, which made sweeping his legs easy. He joined the first guard groaning on the floor.

I didn't stick around to gloat, grabbing the war scythe and slamming the vault door closed behind me. Because the vault was warded against unauthorized entry, there were no security cameras aimed at the door. *There was always a gap.*

I pulled my hastily constructed disguise over my head and draped it around my shoulders. Once I got past this hallway, I still had to make it through the auction room teeming with guards. The only way I could do that was to wait until there was a big enough distraction to provide cover.

Even though it pained me to let it out of my sight, I leaned the war scythe upside down against the wall. The vault door had sturdy metal hinges held in place by thick pins that gave me enough of a foothold to climb. Once I was perched on the locking mechanism, I reached above me and moved one of the hallway's dropped ceiling tiles aside. I shoved the white cloth in first and then carefully fed the war scythe through the opening. After replacing the ceiling tile, I put my shoes back on, touched up my lipstick, and slipped back into the crowded auction room.

Instead of returning to my seat, I searched the room for something I could use to get the scythe out of the building. It took several minutes before I saw my opening. With the auction over, people were streaming out the front door. A few made their way to the bathrooms or stopped at the catering carts for a drink while they waited for their turn to collect their winning bid items. Now that bidding had closed, the auction staff would begin the vetting process before releasing the artifacts to their new owners.

Anxious to wrap up their work night and get home, the caterers were already packing away the leftover food and breaking down tables. The setup crew was preparing for clean up as well. Those preparations included positioning a cleaning cart near each bathroom, including the staff one in the hallway leading to the vault.

I needed a disguise. This time, a classic ghost costume wasn't going to cut it. I smiled recalling my close call with Creed yesterday. In Creed's world, cleaning staff were just as invisible though. And I planned to take full advantage.

CHAPTER 34



The problem with magical security is that the people who relied on it believed it was infallible. Because Creed required everyone to swear a binding magical oath that precluded them from straying from authorized areas, his staff was sloppy about guarding the unauthorized areas. Instead, they concentrated all of their attention on monitoring the public auction space.

I watched until one of the setup crew went into the bathroom in the main room and followed her in. Another woman was drying her hands, and I held the door for her. When only the two of us remained, I waited for my mark to step out of her stall. Her small “oh” of surprise was the only sound she made. Because she was human, she didn’t have the strength to prevent me from covering her mouth with one hand and putting her in a sleeper hold with the other arm.

“Shhhh. I’m not going to hurt you,” I promised. “I just need to borrow your clothes.”

Once the woman was out cold, I pulled her into the wheelchair accessible stall with me and stripped her. “Sorry,” I mumbled as I got the tape out of my purse. I sat her on the toilet and put a piece of tape over her mouth before securing her arms and feet.

I tapped the comms link on while hurriedly dressing in my borrowed uniform. “Dez? Are you there?” Because I felt bad about stealing this poor woman’s clothes, I left the almost new dress neatly folded on the floor next to the toilet. She was about my size.

I didn't have time for chit chat, so I got right to the point when Dez answered. "Is Volkov with you?"

"Riley, Volkov never made it out." Dez sounded rattled. "I tried to reach you."

I stuffed most of the contents of my purse into the plentiful uniform pockets while I talked. I added the sparkly purse with my last twenty dollars to the dress pile. "Why do you sound freaked out?"

Dez swallowed. "They found his comm. I heard the whole thing. They knew it was Volkov. When they found the comm, they accused him of being an Enclave puppet." Dez took a steadying breath before forcing out the rest. "Before they smashed his comm link, I heard Creed tell the guard to take him to a cell for interrogation."

"Shit." I left the stall door locked and climbed underneath. If someone came in, they'd hopefully have no idea an unconscious woman was taped to the toilet next to them.

I rushed to the mirror and wiped most of the makeup from my face before smudging some eyeliner under my eyes to make me look tired. Using the hair band I'd swiped along with the uniform, I pulled the wig into a low ponytail. "How long has it been?" I asked Dez.

"Not long. Ten minutes maybe."

"That's good. Ten minutes is barely enough time to get Volkov in a chair. Can you figure out where they're holding him?"

"Yeah," Dez said. "I'm searching through the various security feeds now."

"Alright. Let me know as soon as you have eyes on him." I forced myself to keep moving, even though the last thing I wanted to do was go back for the scythe. "I'm going to get our prize out of the building, and then we're going after Volkov."

"I'll be ready when you get here," Dez assured me.

He's going to be fine. He had to be. Until Dez had a location locked down, there was nothing I could do for Volkov.

By the time Dez knew where Volkov was being held, I'd be out the door with the scythe, and we could circle back for a rescue.

I forced down the rising panic and focused on doing my part. It took several minutes for a cluster of gossiping men with their backs to me to provide the cover I needed. The whole time, my blood pounded through my veins like the countdown on a bomb. I didn't even slow down as I snagged the cleaning cart from the bathroom and wheeled it to the secure door leading to the vault, using my cloned key fob to unlock it. Retrieving the war scythe was quicker than hiding it.

Now, all I have to do is get it out of the building.

"Got it!" Dez yelled, making me jump. "He's being held in some kind of storeroom in the basement of the building."

I busted the handle off the mop and wedged it into the drop ceiling where I'd hid the scythe. "Is he okay?" I could barely breathe as I waited for the answer.

"For now, but Riley, I don't know for how long."

"Pull together anything we can use as a weapon. I'm on my way."

I grabbed the tape out of my purse and secured the mop head over the blade of the scythe as quickly as I could. Then, I headed back to the main room.

Ninety percent of a successful getaway was having the confidence to walk out of a heist without giving yourself away. The flavor of my favorite cinnamon gum helped settle my nerves as I pushed the cleaning cart through the auction room.

When I spotted Damien Creed near the staff exit, I didn't let my steps falter. Pivoting for the front door would draw too much attention. I hunched my shoulders and bowed my head, so I matched his expectations of the help, and then I headed straight for him. I might as well have been the furniture for all the attention he paid me. He didn't so much as glance at my cleaning cart.

"Hey! Hold up." One of the guards beat me to the door. I clutched the handle of the scythe in both hands, prepared to

take off the head of the baby-faced vampire blocking the exit even if it got me killed. He glanced down to where I was white knuckling the handle, but then he opened the door and stepped to the side.

Relief coursed through me. “Bless you,” I said as I passed through the door he held open for me. “It’s been a long night.”

“That it has,” he agreed.

Dez was waiting for me as I walked toward the line of vans. It was torture to walk slowly as I pushed the cleaning cart to a van with a logo matching my uniform. I nodded to the driver. Then, I snatched the makeshift mop out and held it in front of me as I headed to where Dez stood with the door of our SUV open. I climbed inside.

I waited for the door to close before slumping in relief. Dez climbed in the driver’s side and spun to face me.

“Drive!” I said. “We need to get away from this area, and then we’re going to get Volkov back.”

Dez nodded and started the SUV. He drove us a couple blocks away and parked next to a dark house with no cars in the driveway.

Panicking wouldn’t help anyone, so I focused on my breathing until I had my fear back under control. I climbed into the front seat with Dez. “Show me.”

He grabbed his laptop and spun it around, so I could see the camera footage. Volkov was sitting on a chair, his hands cuffed behind his back. Because we had a side view of him, it was easy to spot the angry red welts around his wrists. I was guessing the cuffs were silver. His legs were duct taped to the chair. From the look of his face, the guards had already worked him over pretty good. Two guards were in the room with him, both of them armed with handguns.

“There.” I pointed to the small window near the ceiling. “That’s how we’re getting in.”

Dez pulled up the building blueprints and tapped the screen. “It has to be here.”

The room was at the opposite side of the building as the staff exit. That was lucky. I stared at the two guards. On camera, there was no way to tell whether they were shifters or vampires. If only they had been human, busting Volkov out of there would have been so much easier. But Damien Creed would never stoop to hiring human guards.

Dez and I grabbed anything we had that could be used to overpower the guards. Neither of us wanted to risk taking the war scythe with us, even if it was tempting to lop off some heads. I still had my stolen blade, but that was the sum total of our weapons except for the magical bombs Helen had sent with us.

Distract and incapacitate was our plan. We agreed our best option was to crack open the window and lob Helen's magical hand grenades at the guards. The pale-yellow bombs would detonate like supercharged glitter bombs packed with nitrous oxide. Whoever got caught in the fallout would be a giggling sparkly mess. The hunter green bombs were more vicious. They worked like a magical stun gun if they came in contact with skin. Instead of a short electrical charge like a taser, they would knock a grown man out.

We crouched on our bellies on either side of the basement window. So that we didn't get confused, we decided to split the bombs by function. Dez had a pile of yellow glitter bombs on the ground next to him. On my side, I had the three hunter green stun bombs—one for each guard and a spare in case one didn't work. I pulled the Vaseline out of my pocket and rubbed a bit on my metal nail file, which I used to jimmy the window open. The Vaseline wasn't strictly necessary, but a little lubrication made the job easier.

Dez brought his laptop with us, so he could watch the room through the security camera. He motioned for me to open the window when the guards were preoccupied and then scrambled the camera feed. It was an old-style basement window, so it opened inward. I eased it down as quietly as I could. Because we knew we only had seconds before the guards might notice the open window, we immediately launched our attack.

Dez tossed two of his glitter bombs at the guards' feet and then followed those with two more to cover his bases. As all four detonated, the small room was blanketed in iridescent glitter. Both guards were covered in it. Even Volkov's midnight hair sparkled. The two guards pointed at each other before breaking into fits of giggles.

It was my turn. I threw a stun bomb at each guard to incapacitate them and waited. *Nothing*. Both were duds. I groaned. I'd have to knock them out the old-fashioned way. Dez grabbed the last one and tossed it at the closest guard. The spare worked, and the guard dropped like a rock. The remaining guard gaped at him and started laughing. I climbed through the window.

"Hey there!" I said cheerfully. Although the guard laughed right through my grand entrance, he reached for his gun. I kicked it out of his hand. Dez was beside me in an instant. Since this guard was a shifter, Dez compelled him to let us leave and forget all of our faces.

I picked the lock on Volkov's cuffs with a bobby pin.

As soon as his wrists were free, he ripped the tape from his legs. "Let's move," he ordered. Volkov pointed at the guards. Instead of issuing another command, something that sounded suspiciously like a giggle escaped his lips. His eyes widened in blatant horror, and he slapped a hand over his mouth.

"You're welcome," I said as I reached up and ruffled his sparkly hair.

Volkov grabbed me and propelled me toward the window without comment. He cupped his hands and boosted me through first, followed by Dez. With his upper body strength, he'd be able to muscle his way onto the window ledge but based on the size of his shoulders, I was afraid it would be too tight of a fit. I had him take his shirt off. Then, I lubed him up with my leftover Vaseline until he slid through the narrow opening like a baby seal. Thankfully, the nitrous oxide wore off quickly.

None of us relaxed until we were in the SUV miles from Flagstaff. Volkov insisted on driving despite his busted ribs.

Before Dez handed Volkov a shirt, I'd gotten a good look at the mottled bruises that covered his torso. Had I seen the extent of his injuries earlier, I would've left those guards in far worse shape. I sat in the front passenger seat to make sure Volkov was okay, not trusting his assurances.

I broke the silence first. "I thought they'd let you go when you told them who you were."

"I didn't tell them. They ran everyone's thumbprints from the magical oath signature. They got a match with mine." He shook his head in disgust. "I should have known they'd do that. As soon as they found out who I was, it was a death sentence."

I gasped. "What? Why?"

"Because I'm on the Tribunal and am connected to the Enclave," he answered.

"And the Enclave would shut the whole underground market down if they found out," I finished. "I shouldn't have insisted we wear the comms. I'm sorry."

"Hey." He reached across the console and grabbed my hand, twining our fingers together. "It's not your fault." When I didn't answer, he shot me a dark look. "Do you hear me? None of this was your fault."

I nodded, even though I didn't believe him.

Volkov watched the road for a few miles before sighing. "All that for nothing. I didn't even get the scythe."

When he looked at me again, I brushed my knuckles across my shoulder and quirked a brow. "Lucky for you, I did." His gaze darted to the back where Dez dutifully held the war scythe up for his inspection.

I filled both Volkov and Dez in on my little improv performance in the vault as we drove home. Even without the nitrous oxide, Volkov shook his head and laughed as I recounted my disguise and choice of knock-out weapon.

A few minutes ticked by before I caught Volkov glancing at me again. "We should have done it your way," he said

finally. He didn't seem happy about the admission though.

I didn't know what to say to that, so I didn't say anything. We had what we came for, and we all walked out of there alive. That was all that mattered.

CHAPTER 35



When the Enclave informed us an official representative was on his way to retrieve the demon artifacts, I imagined another suit. Nothing prepared me for Kage Sato. He was slightly taller than I was, with the kind of body that could actually pull off the skinny jeans he was wearing. It was his Puff the Magic Dragon t-shirt, though, that had Volkov's left eye twitching whenever he glanced Sato's way. The two men were polar opposites.

At the moment, Sato was leaning casually against the counter in Kali's costume shop, where we'd gathered to meet him. In addition to the war scythe, Kali and Craig had managed to recover the magical dagger I'd stolen. Sato was here to take possession of both. I wasn't sure why the Enclave would entrust the safety of such rare and dangerous objects to a man who looked like a Japanese underwear model, but the scythe and dagger were no longer my problem.

According to Sato, these weren't the only demon artifacts, either. It turned out demons really liked making objects of power, and they'd used our realm as the site for a supernatural game of hide and seek. Although stealing the war scythe proved to be the key to defeating the demon who had masqueraded as my buyer, it was unlikely that he'd be the last one who turned up.

Volkov wasn't happy about the possibility of more demons venturing into his territory, and it showed. The air practically vibrated with the alpha's anger. The only one who didn't seem

affected was Sato, who smiled indulgently every time a growl rumbled up from Volkov's chest.

I liked this guy.

Sato turned to me. "The Enclave would like to offer you employment."

My eyebrows shot up, and I leaned forward. "What kind of employment?"

The vague job offer was enough to set Volkov off. Before Sato could give me more details, Volkov grabbed him by the shirt and hauled him off the ground. "Leave her out of this."

Instead of being rattled by the pissed off werewolf manhandling him, Sato smiled. Then, he struck the center of Volkov's chest with his palm, sending the much larger man careening into the counter. Sato landed on his feet like a cat.

I really liked this guy.

"Whoa," I laughed. "I did not see that coming." I needed him to teach me that little party trick. Now, I was even more interested in what the man had to say. "I'm listening."

"The Enclave is aware of your unique skillset, and they'd like to hire you to retrieve the remaining demon artifacts for them," Sato said.

"Hold up." I uncrossed my legs and jumped off the counter where I'd been perched. I ignored the dark look Volkov shot me and moved closer to Sato. "You're telling me they want to pay me to steal for them?"

"Yes. They'll pay you fifty-thousand dollars per artifact plus expenses." Sato waited for my answer.

"Absolutely not," Volkov argued. "It's too dangerous."

I ignored his objections. *Not my alpha. Not his call.* I crossed my arms over my chest and considered Sato. "One hundred thousand plus expenses and no interference. You give me the job, then stay out of it. I do the jobs my way, with my people."

"Done."

Damn it. I needed to work on my negotiating skills. I kicked the wall. “I should have asked for more.”

Sato winked at me. “You really should have.”

One look at Volkov, and it was easy to see his wolf was seconds from slipping his leash. “Don’t do it,” he bit out.

Although Kali and Volkov rarely agreed on anything, this proved to be the one topic that united them. “Riley, think about what you’d be getting into,” she urged. “It’s going to be a demon free-for-all.”

She wasn’t wrong. Those artifacts were going to be hot commodities. But even if Sato hadn’t offered me more money than I ever imagined making, I would have been tempted to go after them. No way was I going to turn down a fat paycheck that came with the Enclave’s stamp of approval.

Sato tilted his head and looked me in the eye. “I won’t lie to you. This will be more dangerous than any job you’ve done.”

I tipped my chin up. “Noted. I’m going to need an advance for expenses.”

Sato nodded solemnly. “I’ll be your handler.”

Volkov growled again and stalked closer until the two men were chest-to-chest. I rolled my eyes and stepped between them before they came to blows.

Sato sighed. “That means I will be the go-between. I’ll give you the assignments when we get word about an artifact, and I will retrieve the artifacts once you’ve secured them.”

Volkov didn’t back down. “You’ll get her killed.”

I was standing close enough that I could feel the slight tremor that passed through Volkov as he glared at Sato. He was afraid for me. But under that fear lurked the lingering belief that I couldn’t handle myself.

While Volkov and I faced off, Kali negotiated with Sato for me to keep the dagger capable of killing a demon as a job perk. It was a loaner, but after losing that same dagger to a

demon, it felt like poetic justice to have it as part of my benefits package.

After Sato left, Volkov offered me a ride home. His stony silence for the first half of the drive telegraphed his unhappiness that I'd accepted the job over his objections. He was convinced it would get me killed.

I was willing to roll the dice to put my hard-earned thieving skills to good use. For once, I'd get to do what I excelled at for a cause I actually believed in. That was worth the risk in my book.

Volkov cleared his throat.

I held up my hand. "If you're going to try to talk me out of it, don't bother. I'm doing it."

"I know." He sighed. "Do you know who you'll recruit for your crew?"

"I do." The idea of doing jobs with people I chose was exhilarating, and I knew exactly who I wanted.

"And?" he prodded.

I smiled. "Naturally, Dez will be my tech security guy."

"Naturally," Volkov agreed, some of the tension leaving his shoulders.

"Kali is going to be in charge of disguises." I hadn't asked her yet, but she'd jump at the chance to dress a team of thieves. "And Helen and the girls will supply me with magic. Plus, Helen is an ace getaway driver."

Volkov chuckled, a little more tension bleeding out of the air. "That I believe." He glanced at me and tightened his grip on the wheel as he asked his next question. "Who will keep you safe while you steal all these artifacts from the Damien Creeds of the world?"

I studied his rugged profile. I knew what he was hinting at, but it would never work. "You mean the muscle?"

He nodded and gripped the wheel a little harder.

"I'm planning on asking Nash Mitchell."

Volkov slammed on the brakes and jerked the wheel, pulling into the nearest parking lot. “Nash Mitchell?” His voice vibrated with anger again. “The man who broke into your apartment, kidnapped you, and tried to kill you? That Nash Mitchell?”

“That’s the one,” I said brightly. “Based on his audition, he seems well suited to the job.”

Volkov stared out his window, wrangling his emotions. “I could do it. Keep you safe that is. You don’t need Mitchell.”

My heart tripped a little at the offer, even as I knew I couldn’t take him up on it. I reached for his hand and pried his fingers off the wheel to lace them with my own. “It would never work, Max. I need someone who will watch my back but also who won’t second guess every decision I make.”

He closed his eyes. I could tell he wanted to object, but even he knew he wouldn’t be able to do that.

“It’s not in your nature to watch me take risks.”

He ground his teeth in frustration. “No. It’s not,” he finally conceded.

We were both lost in our own thoughts as he drove to my apartment. He parked in front of my building and reached for the door, but I stopped him with a hand on his arm. “That’s okay.” I pointed to the tiny smart car idling at the curb. “Dez is here.”

Volkov let go of the handle, and his arm tensed under my hand. “I could try to be what you need,” he said quietly.

“Not for this.” I bent over the console and kissed his cheek. “This is something I have to do for myself.”

He didn’t try to stop me as I climbed out of his car and quietly shut the door behind me.

When I got to Dez’s car, Dez reached across the passenger seat to prop the door open. “Is everything good?” he asked as Volkov drove off.

“Yup,” I said.

“Where to?” Dez asked.

“The Sundowner. I heard they’re short-staffed, and Hopper has been filling in behind the bar,” I said. “Drinks are on me now that I’m a career woman, soon to have a bank account and everything.” Now that I was on the Enclave payroll, they were going to supply me with the documents needed to open an account and pay taxes. Since Carl already knew where to find me, I figured there was no point in staying off book anymore. “Besides, we need to talk about your new role as my tech security guru.”

Dez grinned. “I like the sound of that. Does it come with stock options?”

“Nope. But I’ve been told that I mix a mean Bloody Mary.”

“Sold.” Dez grew serious as he drove us to the Sundowner. He glanced at me a couple times before he shifted the subject to a less jovial one. “I did some more digging,” he confessed.

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh?” My pulse spiked in anticipation of another Carl bombshell. Whatever Dez found, I hoped it was blackmail worthy.

He shifted in his seat. “You know how I couldn’t find any documentation for you, right?”

“Yeah.” Had he found evidence Carl had erased my birth certificate and school records? When Dez sighed and shot a sympathetic look my way, I swallowed. I gripped my seatbelt as I considered another possibility—that Dez unearthed evidence that Carl was responsible for the fire that killed my parents. “Is this about my parents?” My voice was so quiet, if Dez hadn’t been a vampire, he may not have heard it.

“It is.”

I clutched the seat belt until it pulled taut against my chest and braced myself. “Just tell me.”

Dez pulled into the lot behind the Sundowner. “There’s no trace of Santiago or Amelia Cruz before they moved to Santa Fe.” He parked and shut off his car. “I did a lot of digging,

Riley. It's like they didn't exist before 2000. I couldn't find a social security number for either of them."

I closed my eyes. My earliest memories were of the three of us in our cheery kitchen in Santa Fe. Even though they'd mentioned that we'd moved there when I was two, I couldn't recall them ever saying where we'd lived before. *They must have told me at some point. I must have asked.* I frowned, but the memories were elusive. "I can't remember where we lived before New Mexico."

The tiny car interior suddenly felt suffocating. I unbuckled myself and opened the passenger door to let in some much-needed fresh air. I planted my feet on solid ground and dropped my head between my knees, drawing in the crisp night air as if it could clear away the cobwebs in my memories.

"I did a deep dive, Riley." When Dez paused, I knew the worst was yet to come. "The driver's license numbers listed in the police report from the fire appear to be fakes."

"How can that be?" I mentally ran through the P.I. report, including the identification listed for the deceased. "There was nothing in the police report that indicated their licenses were fake. Surely, the authorities would have run the numbers back then. How could they be fake?"

Dez sighed. "They were top-of-the-line fakes. The numbers were listed in the DMV, so anyone who casually ran them wouldn't notice anything out of the ordinary." Dez looked at me. "None of the supporting documentation exist though. There's no record of either of them having a license before 2000. There aren't any out-of-state licenses for either of them. And there's no birth certificate or application for either of their licenses, no record of a driving test or eye test, either."

"Maybe they were in the country illegally," I reasoned.

I blinked back tears as I remembered the light in my father's deep brown eyes whenever he swore in Spanish. It was the only time he didn't speak English. He did it because my mother made him put a dollar in a jar on our avocado-green refrigerator for every swear word. My blonde-haired,

blue-eyed mother only spoke a smattering of Spanish though, and his rapid-fire swearing was too fast for her to use her phone to translate. Although she'd shake her finger at him, he'd wink at me before kissing her until she forgot all about the swear jar perched on top of the fridge.

"Maybe my father was here illegally," I amended.

"Maybe." Dez didn't sound convinced. "What was your mother's maiden name? I can run that and see what I come up with."

"I don't remember," I whispered. *How could I have forgotten my mother's maiden name? Had I ever known it?*

Dez reached over and squeezed my shoulder. "Whatever the reason, we'll figure it out.

He was right. I forced the questions down. I could dredge up my past another day. Tonight, we'd earned a celebration.

"We will." I climbed out of the car. When Dez joined me, I linked my arm with his and headed for the Sundowner. "Now, let's go inside and make Hopper serve us drinks."

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