



Maidens
of
Mayhem

THAT WYVERN GONNA ROAR

MORGUE

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JULIA MILLS



That Wyvern Gonna Roar

Maidens of Mayhem №9

by
Julia Mills



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FOREWORD



Blast Off with us into the Magic and Mayhem Universe!

I'm Robyn Peterman, the creator of the Magic and Mayhem Series and I'd like to invite you to my Magic and Mayhem Universe.

What is the Magic and Mayhem Universe, you may ask?

Well, let me explain...

It's basically authorized fan fiction written by some amazing authors that I stalked and blackmailed! KIDDING! I was lucky and blessed to have some brilliant authors say yes! They have written brand new stories using my world and some of my characters. And let me tell you...the results are hilarious!

So here it is! Blast off with us into the hilarious Magic and Mayhem Universe. Side-splitting books by fantabulous authors! Check out each and every one. You will laugh your way to a magical HEA!

For all the stories, go to <https://magicandmayhemuniverse.com/>. Grab your copy today!

And if you would like to read the book that started all the madness, Switching Hour is FREE!

<https://robynpeterman.com/switching-hour/>

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For Grandma Mary.

*Without your sense of humor and endless sarcasm, I know I wouldn't have
made it this far. This one's for you!*

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ABOUT JULIA

ALSO BY JULIA

WANNA KEEP UP WITH ALL MY CRAZY?

THAT'S WYVERN GONNA ROAR



**Time is running out. The body count is multiplying.
Can a Maiden of Mayhem and her Mate stop the killer before it's too
late?**

Well, as usual, nothing in the Swamp is as it seems, and all the sweet tea and homemade guacamole will make it right. Oh, no, it's all up to a Black Swan Shifter who is the Coroner for five Parishes and also happens to be sorta-kind a Witch, twice removed on her mother's side, a Wyvern who's a Fire Fighter, and a Geek who prefers the term Nerd to save the day.

Great job? She's got that covered.

Sexy Mate? That's well on the way.

A best friend who allows her to be exactly who she especially when it's not politically correct? Oh, heck, yeah, she's got that in spades... *ahem, feathers!*

Betsey Sue Blomfield was well on her way to having it all - then bodies literally started falling out of the sky.

Talk about a whacked-out day at the office!

It's time to head back to the Swamp, have Friday Night Margaritas, and Party Like A Flock. Tallulu Parish has its first serial killer, and nobody knows when he'll strike next.

PART I

BETSEY SUE BLOOMFIELD SAVES THE DAY! OR AT LEAST SHE TRIES



“Morning, Bets.”

"Hey, Bobby. What we got?"

“Same as the others. Only looks like this one might’ve gotten a piece of her attacker.”

My assistant, Bobby, pointed to what appeared to be a swatch of fabric still clutched in the victim’s hand. Hopefully, she’d also scratched the scumbag who’d thrown her off the balcony of her big, brand new McMansion. No, I didn't agree with bulldozing the almost historical homeplace of one of the Tallulu Parish founding families just to put up an opulent, over-the-top, *ostentatious*, mass produced 'shiny-shiny', but I never thought about tossing its owner's booty in the shrubs.

“But you wrote quite a few letters and signed more than one petition,” Babs, the Black Swan with whom I shared my soul, sighed. *“I told you to work a Spell that sent her pink-wearing butt back to where she came from, but did you listen?”*

"Oh, I listened. I just didn't want Zelda and the Baba Yaga to show up and send me to Witchy Jail in Salem, Mass. Do you know what they do to Shifter/Witch hybrids up there?"

"No."

"Well, I'm not sure either, nor do I want to find out," I huffed, covering the all-too-real fear of using my Magic and messing up with righteous indignation.

You see, growing up a Shifter/Witch hybrid was rough going for a while. The Shifters thought I was weird and wanted absolutely nothing to do with me, and the Witches thought I was an abomination.

Of course, it didn't help that my mother's family had disowned her for marrying a Swan Shifter. By default, they also kicked me to the proverbial curb for being, and I quote, 'the bastard Swan and horrendous Witch of an unholy alliance .' I wasn't bothered by it until Dad was killed in a freak swimming accident....

(Read that as killed by a drunk farmer who had loaded his rifle with silver because he was sure a Werewolf was poaching his non-Shifter chickens, who fired out into the lake where Werewolves would never ever never be. Talk about a boob. Everybody knows that no self-respecting Wolf Shifter or Werewolf – because they are two different things – would ever poach chickens. They are just about the top of the Paranormal food chain and can pretty much eat at fancy schmancy restaurants or have their personal chefs whip them up whatever they want. Those furry Lupines are rich with a capital R, and most choose to flaunt it. When they want to hunt – which is waaaaaaaay less than any of those silly movies might make you think – they always go for the biggest and the baddest, just to show the world that they are tough. So, to believe they would attack defenseless chickens on someone's farm is just about the stupidest thing I'd ever heard. I mean, get with the program. Am I right? Well, of course, I am.)

Anyway, after Dad went to the Happily Ever After – our version of

Heaven – things got kind of dicey. The Witch community didn't like us, the Shifter community acted like we just plain didn't exist, and well, taking refuge in the bosom of our family was out of the question. So, Mom worked some serious Hocus Pocus, put it in a locket, and made sure I never took it off until I was old enough to fend for myself.

With my necklace, I appeared to be everyone and anyone as a Null – aka, a child born to a Supernatural Being, like my mom, the Witch, who had not a drop of Magic. Then, to be sure I had a decent life, she moved us all the way across the country to the Big Apple, and the rest, as they say, was history. Now, that's enough of the Life and Times of Dr. Betsey Sue Bloomfield for now. I just know I will have to tell you more later, but we've got work to do.

So, where was I? Oh, yeah....

Our latest victim, Misty Dawn Callahan, wasn't a bad person. She just had more money than sense and thought the world should be painted pink – Barbie pink. I wasn't judging. Just stating the facts. Although, I think calling it Barbie pink was like whitewashing a pig. It was Pepto Bismol Fuschia, and that's all there was to it.

However, the Pink Princess, her Instagram handle, had gotten a piece of her killer. With any luck, we'd be able to get some DNA from underneath her inch-and-a-half long, filed to a sharp point, bright fuchsia, and totally fake fingernails and put the person who was doing all the killing behind bars. It was a long shot, and I knew it. Hell, Bobby knew it, too. But it was better than nothing. Up until now, there hadn't even been a speck of dust out of place at any of the other crime scenes, let alone any usable evidence. Finding something was a shot in the dark, but it was the only shot we had.

Since I was the Coroner for five Parishes in a part of Louisiana known as The Swamp, it fell to me to coordinate all the evidence and disseminate it to the police and Sheriff's departments and any detectives who came my way. You see, there had been six homicides in as many days spread out all over my jurisdiction, and it looked like the killer was just getting started.

As if that wasn't bad enough, they all had the same MO – modus operandi - jugular *and* carotid cut, drained of all blood, then thrown out the highest window of a McMansion into some well-manicured bushes. It was frustrating on every level and made my blood boil.

Oh, and I almost forgot, all the bodies sported a 'B' carved into a very intimate part of their anatomies. It was not something any of us working on the case wanted the general public to know. Sure, the killer knew it was there because he'd put it there, and that could be the key the Prosecutor used to put him behind bars. But not even some crazy photographer with a telephoto lens could get a look at it because it was undetectable by anyone but the victim's mother, their lover, their gynecologist, or, in this case, their friendly neighborhood Coroner.

However, if, by some stroke of madness, the press did get a hold of the information, all hell would break loose, and it would not be good. Think apocalyptic. Imagine bad news sweeping across a place full of Supernatural, Paranormal, and Special Beings with super strength, Magic, and all sorts of other stuff that really goes haywire when they are pissed or stressed or all of the above. It was not something any of us wanted to have happen.

Oh, and I forgot to mention all the victims were Shifters. Talk about a shitstorm brewing on the horizon. This fact also posed the question: how did the killer overpower his victims if he – or she – was not something Magical too? It was common knowledge that Paranormal beings were endowed with all kinds of kicked-up, enhanced senses and abilities. So, at least in my mind, it only stood to reason that we were looking for someone Supernatural.

But not everyone subscribed to my theory. More on that later.

"I'm done here. You got all you need, Bobby?" I asked, pulling off the black rubber gloves I wore at every crime scene as I stood up and prayed for the blood to return to my toes.

"Well, if you didn't insist on wearing high heels to work, your toes wouldn't hurt."

"But I love my shoes."

"Yeah, well, I would love to only eat shrimp and escargot, but you don't like either."

"I am not having this conversation, Babs. We are at a freakin' crime scene for cripes' sake." And with that, I put the Black Swan with whom I shared my soul on ignore and focused on what my assistant was saying.

"Yeah, I'm good. I'll get our vic loaded into the bus and meet you back at the office."

"Thanks. I'll grab the coffee."

"You're my hero. Can you get me a donut, too?"

"You got it, Bobby. See you in a bit."

Heading to my car, I wondered why the Tallulu Parish Sheriff's Department had yet to arrive. I'd asked the officers keeping the Looky Lous away from the scene and was told they were on their way, but I'd yet to see hide nor shiny gold of a badge.

Now, you're going to think that I've lost my mind. Why would I want a bunch of clod-footed officers walking all over my crime scene and asking me questions I couldn't answer until I'd completed the autopsy? Well, (1) I hadn't lost my mind. I will sometimes go a little crazy, but I never ever never lose my mind because, most times, it's all that reminds me I am actually sane. And (B) Because I wanted to get a look at a very sexy man I was sure was my Mate.

I know you're confused, but all will become clear. Just bear with me. I promise there is a point to my rambling.

So, the Sheriff of Tallulu Parish just happened to be J.B. St. Sabin, a Hound Dog Shifter who was the Mate of a dear friend of mine, Maxine Monroe, renowned psychiatrist to all Beings Shifterly, owner and operator of Bailmore Hall, the world's most renowned Home for the Shifterly Insane, and the founder of the Maidens of Mayhem. I love Max and J.B. as if they were my own, and their twins were just about the cutest Hound Dog/Pink

Flamingo kids you've ever seen. I only brought all this up to get to my real point – the new Fire Chief, the sexiest Wyvern ever to walk the earth, and the man I am almost positive was made for me by the Universe, Will Waterford.

(Oh, heck, I might as well be honest - I. Know. He's. My. Mate. All the signs are there, and there is no use even trying to deny it. So, there you have it, and we will be moving on.)

You might be wondering why the Fire Chief would come to the scene of a murder where not a single flame, puff of smoke, or even an ash was involved. Well, let me tell you. It was because he was new to Tallulu Parish and asked J.B. if he could shadow him to get a feel for how things worked in our little part of the world.

As you can imagine, I was thrilled. It meant I could 'bump' into said sexy Wyvern without making up some silly reason to show up at a fire. When you think about it, had Will not asked our beloved Sheriff for the favor, I would have pretty much been screwed as far as any kind of meet-cute situation was concerned. I mean, why would the Coroner ever go to the Fire Station? If there did happen to be a fatal fire in The Swamp – which there had not been in as long as anyone could remember – the Fire Department was the first to arrive and knew the details. It was the Chief who gave me all the information concerning the blaze and any evidence they needed me to run through my amazing machines. Yes, I did the autopsy, but the Fire Chief, or any of the other members of the Squad, never came to the Morgue. Yeah, now you see what I was up against.

Anywho, it also meant that I had J.B. as a buffer. Because, well, my mouth tended to start running at a hundred miles a minute before my brain even thought about engaging. At the best of times, when I was nervous, all that flew across my lips were a couple of Babs' snorts or whistles. Thankfully, those noises were easy to laugh off. All I did was blame the crazy Black Swan with whom I shared my soul and wait for her to get her revenge sometime in the future. (Because Babs always gets her revenge no

matter how long it takes.) It was a fair trade and one I'd resigned myself to in my youth. However, on the rare occasion I actually spoke, it came out a garbled mess of words that inevitably formed a detailed retelling of one of my most embarrassing moments.

I did not – I repeat with emphasis - *did not* want that to happen when talking to the man I was meant to spend forever and ever amen alongside.

Therefore, ever since I overheard the conversation in which Will Waterford asked J.B. if he could ride along for a couple of weeks, I'd been hoping to catch a glimpse of that sexy Wyvern.

I'm pretty sure my secret was safe. My peripheral vision was excellent, and I had the ability to keep my head pointed in the direction of whatever I was looking at while letting my eyes scan my surroundings. I had perfected these skills while being a childhood outcast and decided to keep them honed as time marched on.

So, when I tell you that I was on the lookout for six-foot-four inches of muscles, tanned skin, perfectly sun-streaked hair, and sex appeal that made me weak in the knees and did not plan to get caught looking – you can take me at my word. Yes, I had spoken to Will. We'd even made plans to get together for coffee, but so far, my phone wasn't ringing, and that made me want to remind him of my existence more than I wished for a venti frou-frou, highly caffeinated coffee with enough white chocolate syrup to give a human a toothache and a pile of whipped cream swirled on top every morning before I spoke to another living soul.

Cora - my best friend in the whole wide world, and a part Witch/part Crane Shifter whose Mate was Will's best friend – continued to tell me that I had nothing to worry about, but I was worried. Meeting the man made for me by the Universe while Cora's house was on fire and our buddy, Zelda, the Almighty Shifter Wanker and the Witch next in line to be the Baba Yaga, was about to be sacrificed by a Gator-Lovin' Cult had never been - and would never be - in any romantic movie, book, or instruction manual in the world.

No, Will wasn't out traipsing through the weeds of The Swamp with me, Cora, and her Dragon, Duncan, to save Zelda. He was commanding the men, the Wyvern, who were saving my bestie's newly renovated mansion from becoming a smoldering pile of ashes.

It's a hilarious story that I will condense into a few short sentences. Cora tried to work a Spell. It went haywire. She knocked Duncan – while in Dragon form – out of the sky. Cora locked Duncan - back in human form - in her root cellar. Duncan got pissed and breathed fire. The rest, well, you already figured that out, and if you want to know all the gory details, well, you'll just have to read her story.

As for when I laid eyes on my hunka-hunka-Wyvern hotness, well, that came after we returned to what was left of my BFF's mansion. While driving up the long, stone-covered driveway in my prized possession – a black as my very own feathers, 1969 Dodge Charger-440 that I restored entirely and totally by myself after finding it in a pile of smashed-up cars at Billy Joe McCormack's Smash 'Em Up Derby – Babs jumped to attention and honked so loudly I was sure my ears were about to bleed.

My hands gripped the steering wheel. Goosebumps danced up and down my spine. My heart beat like the bass drum in a marching band in the Rose Bowl Parade being played by a horde of toddlers hyped up on Pixie Stix, and then that beautiful man came into view.

That elusive piece of my soul, the one Mom said I wouldn't know was missing but would slip into place when I met my Mate – did just that and so much more. My senses went from kicked up to off-the-charts. Babs' black feathers popped in and out of the flesh on my arms like they'd been hooked up to a disco ball, and the Magic I'd inherited from dear old Mom popped and crackled like fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Out of the car and across the lane before I realized I'd even put my beloved car in park, I opened my mouth to be cool, calm, and clever and instead trumpeted, bugled, and everything else you can imagine. Cold sweat

drenched my upper lip. My hands shook with such fervor that the rings on my second and third fingers jingled together. And had it not been for Clem, a cute little Canary Shifter and lifelong resident of The Swamp, stepping in and speaking for me, I would have died from embarrassment right then and there.

Thankfully, Fate had a plan that no one – not even me – could screw up. For in that moment, right before I passed away from humiliation, I saw the stars in Will's eyes and knew all would be well. He was just as smitten as I was, and that made my little heart go pitter-pat.

I have no clue how long we stood there looking into each other's eyes, but however long it was, it just wasn't enough. I was so gone I almost growled and snapped when one of the other Wyverns, the men of Will's Force, hollered for him to come and see something they'd found.

That time, it was J.B. who saved me from biting a firefighter and then dying of mortification. It was also that sweet Hound Dog who gave Will my number and suggested he text the first couple of times because I was always busy with work. (No, he did not mention that when texting, I could not make a fool of myself, and for that, I will forever be grateful.)

Have I mentioned that I love J.B. and Maxine like they were my own kids? In case I haven't, I do, and I always will.

After four days of checking my phone every two-point-two seconds, the first message came through. It was short, sweet, and to the point. *Hey, Betsey Sue. This is Will Waterford. I wanted to see if you would like to get a cup of coffee with me.*

Holding my phone over my heart with both hands, I danced around the autopsy room while singing Etta James' *At Last* until Bobby came in to see if I was okay. Of course, I shared my good news with him, and then he helped me craft the perfect response. It was also short, sweet, and to the point. *I would love to. Just tell me when and where.*

True to form, or more to the point, true to my life, the next day, a Wolf Shifter from Los Angeles who'd recently remodeled the old Darrah estate to

look like something out of Ugly Homes and Worse Gardens sporting an aqua-tiled driveway lined with bright yellow planters ended up in the bushes under the balcony of her theatre room. And the fun hadn't stopped there.

The bodies kept dropping - literally. To quote my dad, I was busier than a one-armed paper hanger.

Sure, Will and I continued to text. We were slowly getting to know one another – with the emphasis on slowly – *very, very slowly*. But it was okay. We had forever, right?

"Yeah, but you're not gettin' any younger, Girlie."

"Shut. Up. Babs."

Anyway, enough backtracking. I really had to do the autopsy on Misty Dawn Callahan and find the creep playing Dropsy with rich, pretty female Shifters who had recently moved to The Swamp.

"That better be my boss, and she *better* have coffee and donuts, or I'm going on strike," Bobby hollered as my heels tapped against the tile, announcing my arrival.

"She does, and she's so amazing that she brought you a baker's dozen with all your favorites."

I made it precisely two steps into my office before my five-foot-five, carrot-topped assistant flew into the room. His John Lennonish glasses were in their usual place at the tip of his nose, and his cheeks were bright red from the frigid temperatures of our workspace, making his millions of freckles even more pronounced than usual. He was still sporting his thick yellow rubber gloves and apron as he reached for his coffee and confections. Using my Magic – both Witchy and Shifty – I flitted and floated off the floor with the coffee and donuts over my head.

Pulling the gloves off his chubby little fingers, the Owl Shifter threw them in the trash, along with his disposable apron, and me a stink eye over the frames of his glasses that might have turned a lesser woman to stone. But I was used to his games.

Biting the inside of my cheeks to keep from busting out laughing, I lowered my curvy self - and the food - and placed it into his outstretched hands. Still glaring like a pissed-off Cabbage Patch doll, he grumbled to himself, cleared a spot on my desk, plopped in the only other chair beside mine in the room, and began chowing down.

Halfway through donut number two and with a mouthful of powdered sugar, Bobby tried to tell me something he found extremely important. All I could make out was 'Sheriff,' 'homeless,' and 'stabbed,' or at least I thought that was what he said.

Rolling my eyes and shaking my head, I sighed. "Bobby, my dear boy, swallow first. I mean, really, you have the manners of a pack of wild hyenas."

Finishing his donut and following it up with a big gulp of coffee, the cutie who preferred to be called a nerd instead of a geek began again. "Somebody from J.B.'s office called. They found the body of a homeless guy who'd been stabbed in the heart around the bend from Misty Dawn Callahan's house. Whoever called, sorry, I didn't get his name, said the scene had been worked over by every vagrant within a mile radius, so the paramedics bagged and tagged the victim, and they're on their way in right now."

"Homeless and vagrants? Who the hell was it? We don't have either in Tallulu Parish. We take care of our own. Hell, Maxine's cleared a whole floor at Bailmore Hall for people in need. Are you sure it was J.B. and Wi...." I let my words fade, knowing I'd opened my mouth before engaging my brain and giving Bobby more fodder for his ever-growing 'tell me everything about you and Will the Wyvern' diatribe.

Grinning like the cat that ate the canary, that wily little Owl answered my unfinished question in a sing-song voice. "No, it was not J.B. and his sidekick, Will, on the phone. Apparently, they caught another case across town. It was someone else who was quick to tell me that the Sheriff and the Fire Chief would be taking the case this afternoon. Never fear, boss lady,

your Prince Charming will be back on the beat ASAP.”

Laughing at his own joke and grabbing two more donuts, the brat scurried out of the room, shouting over his shoulder, “Gotta get back to Misty Dawn Callahan’s fingerprints and bloodwork. I know we know who she is, but rules are rules, and procedure is procedure. Chop, chop, and all that. Don't want to make our office look bad.”

I could've run after him or even yelled after him, but it wasn't worth it. Bobby was the closest thing to a little brother I had, not to mention that he was one hell of an Assistant Medical Examiner, so I put up with his overzealous interest in my love life and whatever hair-brained schemes he cooked up while perfectly completing ten things at one. Sometimes, I considered telling him about my crazy heritage and stories of my childhood, but then I imagined the plethora of questions flying from his lips, and I rethought my plan.

Oh, and Babs never failed to tell me that she would make my life a living hell. So, I kept my mouth shut.

Finishing my coffee in peace, I put on my lab coat and headed to the exam room. Our office was always busy, but lately, we were slammed. Bobby had three tables prepped, and the other one was filled with the supplies he still needed to place.

A quick glance at the wall of cold chambers showed all but four compartments filled, and I knew we had another on the way. It would be a long couple of days, but since sleep was not something I required, I would keep working, even when my favorite little Owl had gone home. Since he didn't know about my mixed DNA or the ability to go without sleep for at least a week, the Witches of my mom's family possessed, all I had to do was make the amount of work I got done seem reasonable and I was in the clear. It was something I'd gotten good at over the years.

Dressed in all my gear, I stepped up to Misty Dawn Callahan, started the overhead recorder, and began with the physical description for the record. I

had just started my Y-incision when Bobby called from the computer in the corner. “Did you know that MDC – by the way, I’m going with initials since we have so many – was an attorney when she wasn't taking pictures of her food and posting them on Instagram? I can't even imagine sitting across the courtroom from her. She definitely doesn't look like an attorney.”

"No, she doesn't, but it makes sense. One of the crime scene techs, I think his name was Jones, said she had a library the size of the dining room at the Elk's Lodge."

“Wow, I should’ve gone in the house.”

“Nope, our victim was outside.”

“You are no fun.”

“Aww, I am too, and you love me.”

“Yeah, I do.”

Chuckling at the genuine affection in his voice, I steered us back to business. "So that gives us a Pediatrician, Psychiatrist, College Professor, CEO, and the owner of the largest software company in the South, along with Misty Dawn, the attorney and Instagram influencer. Me thinks our killer has a problem with powerful women. Can you say mommy issues?"

“Trying out your psychology minor there, boss?” Bobby’s voice raised just enough to tell me that his eyebrows had gone to the top of his forehead, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"Not so much that, but come on, this can't be a coincidence. Every one of our victims was rich, successful, in their thirties, and Shifters.”

“Is there a doctor in the house?” J.B.’s voice floated into the room. Then Will added, “I sure hope so,” and I was a goner.

My heart fluttered, just as it had the first time I’d met him, just as it did every time. The low timbre of his voice, combined with his rolling Welsh accent, made my pulse race and my palms sweat. (Yes, Supernatural. Paranormal, and all Others sweat. Don’t you remember me telling you about the waterfall on my top lip the first time I laid eyes on my Wyvern?)

Trying to sound cool, I answered, "She is. Is there someone in need of medical attention?" Chuckling in as sexy a tone as I could muster, I even added, "My specialty is the dead, but I'll see what I can do with y'all warm bodies."

I saw J.B. out of the corner of my eye, but the Magical bolt of energy shooting up my arm when Will touched my fingers had me turning to the right. Never taking his eyes off mine, the sexiest man to ever grow wings lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it like it was something precious amid the dead bodies and antiseptic smells, and right in front of Bobby, who'd appeared in a flash. Always a gentleman, at least as far as I had seen, Will steadied me on my shaky legs before stepping back.

Grinning, the knowledge of how he affected me shining brightly in his eyes, he smiled. "I missed you so much, I thought I might die. J.B. suggested I see a doctor, and we ended up here. Do you think it's terminal?"

"No, but I better do a thorough exam later," I responded with a grin. Will winked, and I swooned. "Glad to see we've stopped pussy-footin' around," I whispered for his ears only.

"I am, too."

Before I could answer, the sound of pretend gagging came from behind us, and Bobby called out, "Y'all are gonna make me lose my coffee and donuts. Get. A. Room."

"I told you there are tons of girls in this town who love guys with brains, Bobby. Sure I can't set you up? Might help you loosen up a little," J.B. teased as we turned to begin our consultation about Crystal Dawn's untimely demise.

It took about an hour, but the general consensus was we were no closer to finding out who was killing these beautiful women than when we started. It was the most frustrating case I'd had to date, and it seriously pissed me off. I looked at J.B. and could see the wheels turning. My eyes went to Will's and saw the same expression.

Experience told me not to bother a man while he was thinking, so I continued my Y-incision and began to remove what was left of Crystal Dawn's organs for Bobby to weigh and test. It wasn't my favorite part of the job, but it was required in every autopsy, especially in a suspicious death.

However, this time it bothered me. Somehow, taking apart what was left of the sixth woman, who had literally been thrown away like yesterday's garbage, was getting the best of me. It didn't help that the killer was being called the "The Getaway Man" by the press, and I had no clue about his identity. It was all getting the best of me.

The *ding-ding-ding* of the Polymerase Chain Reaction Machine signaled that at least one of the DNA tests Booby was running was complete. Dropping what he was doing, the little Owl ran from his place across the table from me like he was shot out of a cannon.

First, there was a groan. Then there was a loud sigh. That was all it took for me to know that, once again, we'd come up empty-handed.

"Well, I guess that means our break is over." Looking at Will, J.B. shook his head and huffed. "Looks like we need to get creative to find out this asshole."

Making eyes at me, Will also got to his feet. Coming closer, he kissed me on the cheek. "I don't think I can wait anymore."

"I'm so glad to hear you say that."

"I'll see ya' later, yeah?"

"You sure will."

Looking over, I saw Bobby had returned to his task, looking like he'd lost his last friend, and to be honest, I felt the same way. How in the hell was this douchebag subduing these woman – these Shifters - cutting their necks from ear to ear, letting their blood drain, and then throwing them out a window, and no one heard a damned thing? No one saw him? He left absolutely nothing behind? It was as if he was a ghost.

But I knew he wasn't. Ghosts kill with fright, not knives, which hadn't

happened since the Great Resolution of 1885. Sure, everything Paranormal and Supernatural that was technically living had always looked down on Specters, and it led to an uprising none of us ever expected. But that was all behind us now. Some high-powered and much respected Supernatural Beings had put their heads together and saved the day. So, no Ghost had killed these women. I would bet everything I had on it.

“Whatcha see, Bobby?”

“Nothing,” he growled, his jaw clenched so tightly I could hear his teeth grinding together. “The tox screen showed nothing. Not one of them was drugged or even had a drink in the hours preceding their deaths.”

“What about the fluids you extracted from the organs?”

“I’m testing them for everything, including residue found at the bottom of a kitchen sink.”

"All we can do is pray we find something - *anything*," I nodded.

"Yeah, well, I'm thinkin' we need to call one of those high-powered Witches you just happen to know," Bobby pushed just the tiniest bit. "Are you acquainted with the Baba Yaga?"

"Yes, I am, and no, I won't." Shaking my head, I looked him in the eye. "I won't involve Carol or even Zelda in this. Besides, J.B. might just skin me alive. He wants all the facts of this case locked up tighter than Miss Mae's chastity belt."

"Yeah, well, Miss Mae might have been the most famous virgin in the whole state of Louisiana, but I'm pretty sure she loosened the strings every once in a while."

"You believe your stories, and I'll believe mine." Giving him a wink to let him know all was okay between us, I added, "In the meantime, I'm gonna get started on the pre-exam on the homeless man. He's not from around here, that's for sure. It just makes no sense. We just don't have homeless people in T.P."

“Maybe something good can come from his death,” Bobby whispered

softly. "If he was murdered by the same person, then we can hope the killer got sloppy because he thought you wouldn't put the two together."

"That's what I'm hoping for."

Hours ticked by. Bobby and I worked until almost midnight. It wasn't until he dropped his scalpel for the fourth time that I insisted he go home.

"But Bets, I don't feel right leaving you all alone. I need to stay and help you figure this shit out."

Pushing him towards my office, I helped him out of his protective gear and lab coat. Then I put his messenger bag over his shoulder and walked him to the door. "Go home, Bobby. Get some sleep. That's an order. I'll see you in the morning. Don't worry about being on time. Get here when you get up. I called that new Doctor from NOLA for a consultation. I'm just gonna bed down in my office when I can't keep my eyes open any longer."

I could see he wanted to continue arguing, so I added, "I'll call J.B. and Will or maybe one of the girls to come hang out with me, okay?"

Looking at me over his glasses, he acted like he could read my mind. With his eyes narrowed and his lips pursed tight, he touched his temple with his index finger and then laughed, "Well, it was worth a try."

"Yeah, okay, Mighty Kreskin, get outta here."

"Whatever you say, Boss."

I knew at that point the poor kid was about to fall over and had no choice but to leave, and that was fine with me. The poor guy needed some sleep. I watched as he walked through the heavy double doors, then I returned to my office.

Over the years, I'd found that sometimes I had to go old school when solving a problem. I had to get all the actual pictures and accurate paper reports, spread them out where I could look at each and every one, then see what doesn't fit. It was like playing the game kindergarteners play: 'Which One of These is Not Like the Other Ones.'

I was looking for the thing - or things - that didn't fit. Every time I did

this, Bobby thought I was crazy. However, I'd noticed that the longer we worked together and the more times my antiquated system worked, the closer he came to the dark side.

"Cue the evil laughter," Babs chimed in after an extended and much-needed break from her sass and snark.

"I'm not evil, just good at what I do."

"And humble, too," she scoffed. *"Don't forget humble."*

"Just go back to sleep, Babs."

"You should take your own advice."

"I will."

I would never admit it to her, but that blasted Black Swan was right. I needed some sleep. *Had it been a week since I got a good night's sleep? Yeah, probably.*

It took me a little while to gather up all the files, print the stuff we usually stored in the computer, change into my yoga pants and an old Van Halen T-shirt I'd gotten at the thrift store, and put my hair up in a ponytail. I grabbed my snack bag filled with everything from apples and baby carrots to Funyuns, jellybeans, and Twizzlers I needed to organize the information.

I was a junk food junkie. There was no denying it. I tried to be healthy. I packed all the fruits and veggies and even added yogurt and string cheese sometimes, but it didn't matter. My fingers went straight for the salty, sweet, yummy, high fat snacks, and I was old enough to know I wasn't about to change.

"Time to get to organizing," I sighed into the silence.

First, I put the ante mortem pictures on the rolling bulletin board in order of death, then added the post mortem ones. After I was satisfied with their placement, I did the same with each pertinent piece of paper. By three a.m., I had everything I needed displayed in an order that made sense to me, and was just about to sit in the middle of all of it and see what I could find.

The radio behind me signaled I would have company in the next hour or

two. Some guy drank too much moonshine and then played chicken with a train. That was gonna be a fun identification. The tech had used the phrase - a mushy meat puzzle with pieces missing. Remember that country song, '*Some Days Are Diamonds*'? So far, the last six days had been lumps of coal, and that was all I had to say on the matter.

Have you ever looked at something so hard you missed what was staring you right in the face? Yeah, me too, and this case was one of those times. I had to take a step back and get a new perspective. Getting up to refresh my coffee, I poured what had become black sludge into my favorite mug and started a new pot.

“Two things are really naggin’ at me,” I talked aloud to myself. “Why is the killer carving a 'B' in the victims' special places? And (2) Why does he choose successful women who are also Shifters?”

The answers to these questions had to be the keys to finding him. I felt it in my bones.

The lists of known associates J.B. had added to the digital file were no help. Yes, these lovely ladies had been part of the up-and-coming young professionals scene in T.P. – if there was such a thing - but, at least by all accounts, they hadn't even known each other, much less hung out with the same people. No one had been able to find any serious love interests. Only casual dinners associated with work or promoting their brands, and those were so rare they weren't worth mentioning.

There was a report detailing their social media activity that I'd looked at several times but, for one reason or another, had never gotten all the way through. Our victims were nothing if not prolific in all things Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Looking at all the posts, photos, and memes was exhausting, but something was screaming at me to take a closer look.

Taking an 'almost' lotus position – because let's face it, curvy girls do not make good pretzels even if we do yoga every day but Sunday - I plopped down in the middle of my mess, shoved everything but the computerized

reports to the side, and carefully went line by line through each woman's life on the web. It was mind-numbing, but I knew it had to be done.

I thought I had no life. *Sheesh!* On the outside, to the casual observer, these ladies looked like they had social lives to rival James Bond. However, in reality, they only promoted their businesses or brands while fending off well-meaning family members trying to set them up with every single man on this continent and a few others whose origins were unknown.

Some of the pictures made me laugh, and the messages were beyond hilarious – despite – or maybe because of – the situation. One in particular, Olivia Huntington – victim number two – proved my point in spades. The messages from her mother were priceless and oh so very motherly. The guy looked like an absent-minded professor who had literally run a comb through the front of his hair while the back stood up like the tail feathers of a Percival Peacock looking for his next girlfriend. Not to mention, the poor soul had simply thrown a worn-out, threadbare jacket over his wrinkled, faded, plaid button down and hoped for the best. My favorite part was how the side of the shirt's collar was over the jacket's collar while the other side was tucked in. Someone had obviously told him to take off his glasses, bite the tip of the arm, and look thoughtfully into the camera. Poor dear looked constipated and scared and in need of a new pair of spectacles.

Olivia's mother had given a full, two-paragraph bio detailing the awesomeness of Dr. Byron Whimplesnod, Professor of Anthropology at LSU and a Sloth Shifter. Olivia had been polite - as only a well-raised Southern girl who knows her momma can kick her ass no matter how far apart they are - can be when she'd answered. She explained how busy she was with the fourth start-up in the third country of her software company. After much debate, however, she did relent and promised to call Dr. Whimplesnod. I made a note to check her phone records. It wasn't that I didn't trust J.B.'s team or believed they weren't doing their best to find this killer. It was that, for some strange reason, I felt a kinship to these women. They were my

sisters in some unexplainable way, and I owed it to them to do everything in my power to bring their killer to justice.

Thankful for my Shifter and Witch abilities, I spent the next hour in super-speed, repeating the process I'd established with Olivia's information on all the others. The techs dropped off the 'Train Tamer' as I affectionately called anyone silly enough to stand in the way of a speeding locomotive. I knew he would be okay for a little while longer, so I highlighted reports, made notes, and grouped clues until my eyes felt as if they might bleed if I didn't take a break.

Walking around the vast expanse that made up the Morgue, I followed the path Bobby and I called "Dead Man's Track". Yeah, it was morbid, but we are Pathologists, and well, morbid was what we signed up for.

Anyway, we paced Dead Man's Track when we were stuck working, had consumed too much coffee and too many doughnuts, or felt the effects of cabin fever setting in from too many hours in the Morgue. It was three-quarters of a mile if you made every loop and went in and out of every office.

Deep in thought, following the abundance of clues I'd collected to an unknown destination, I walked the track. Do you know those damn hidden picture paintings? The ones where the artist used a larger picture to disguise his real intent, and all you had to do was stare at it long enough for your brain to move beyond the obvious to the concealed? That was what was happening in my brain. I had seen something or written something that my brain was trying its darndest to discern. Sadly, and for some unknown reason, that little bit of information was hiding in plain sight.

"It's right there," I murmured. "I know it is. I can feel it. I just need to get to it. My 'spidey senses' as Cora and all the Maidens of Mayhem, my Flock, called them, were all but smacking me in the back of the head, and still, I struggled.

More frustrated than I could remember being since the day I tried to work a Spell to make chocolate chip cookies for the handsome quarterback of PS

191 in the Bronx, I started my second trip around the track.

The cookie dough that painted the walls of our apartment was delicious, even if I messed up the Spell on a grand scale. Sadly, I never got to give them to the good-lookin' boy, but he ended up being a dick. So, all's well that ends well.

Let's see, where was I? Oh, yeah....

Deep in thought, I only half registered the sound of the double doors at the back of the Morgue opening. I thought I'd locked those when Bobby left. Figuring one of the EMTs or techs had forgotten something, I ignored the noise and kept moving.

"Names, think names." I tapped my temple with the tip of my index finger and continued my trek.

Every note I'd taken, every name, date, weight, and... *just everything* floated through my mind. Then it just became all the names. List after list of names. What I was looking for was in there. It had to be. I'd made at least five lists covering the front and back of a page of a legal pad, each that was nothing but names. Names of co-workers, names of known associates, names of appointments they had the week leading up to their deaths, names of family members, and names of... OH MY GREAT GODDESS! That was it! How had I been so blind?

Spinning on my heels, I ran as fast as possible in my sock-covered feet. Sliding across the tile, I decided not to use my Paranormal speed. Just the thought of coming up with an explanation for a broken nose from running into a wall seemed exhausting. Yes, everyone knew I was a Black Swan Shifter, and we healed quickly, but not fast enough. People would see. *Will would see*. And that was something I was not about to let happen.

I needed to look at my notes. I needed to see....

The sound of boots striking tile echoed through my abandoned lab. My heart started to beat a bit faster – and for a Feathered Shifter of any variety that was saying something. Our hearts tended to do double time when we

were asleep. So, you can just imagine the *thumpity-thump-thump-thump* that was going on in my chest at that moment.

For a split second, I thought it was Will. I was immediately relieved. He really had meant that he was tired of waiting. Maybe it wasn't the best time to 'consummate' what the Universe, Fate, and Destiny had put into place, but was there ever a bad time to be with the one made for you?

Then my Super Shifter hearing picked up just a slight stutter in the gait of every other step. Not Will. His swagger had been engraved in my brain from the first moment I saw it. My man had just a slight scrape of his right heel after every step. It was kind of like he was two-stepping every time he walked. The person whose steps I heard probably didn't even know one leg was just a fraction shorter than the other, but as I have learned, Shifter hearing coupled with a heaping healing of momma's Witchy Magic does not lie.

"I'm coming," I called out. "We're almost full up. Hope you're here to pick up instead of deliver."

"Oh, I'm here to pick up, all right," was the only answer I got before I was bathed in total darkness. Skidding to a halt, I barely missed hitting the doorframe of the file room before I had a hold of the wood.

Goosebumps rose all over my body, not from the lack of light because, as I have mentioned more times than I am sure you wanted to hear, I have enhanced senses, and sight is one of them. No, I didn't have a serious case of the heebie-jeebies from the darkness. It was from the utter creepiness of the voice that had called out to me.

There was something familiar about it. I'd heard it before, maybe not with the 'Phantom of the Opera' vibe he gave off at that moment, but I *knew* that voice. Ducking behind the massive row of industrial-sized filing cabinets, I reached for my cell phone. *Dammit!* I wasn't wearing my lab coat, and the yoga pants I'd grabbed didn't have pockets. Therefore, my phone was most likely sitting amidst the pile of evidence I'd left spread all over my office

floor.

Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking I'm a Shifter and a Witch, and because I've told you about all the wonders in the Paranormal world, you know I have super strength. So, you think that I should be confronting whoever dared to enter my domain.

First of all, domain? Really? To that, I say you've watched too many movies and read too many stories.

Secondly, I'm a geek. A doctor. An intellectual with no discernable defensive skills whatsoever unless forced to let Babs come forward, and that was not about to happen in the Morgue. Hell, I couldn't even Magick up a batch of chocolate chip cookies, let alone learn how to land a punch without breaking my thumb.

I do have to say, God bless my friends. Cora, Maxine, Clem, and all the other Maidens of Mayhem had organized more than a few self-defense classes. They were sure I could learn. J.B. even had a female officer take a stab at it. Maxine said he thought the key to turning me into a lean, mean fighting machine would come from someone of my own gender.

First of all, lean and mean are not two adjectives anyone would ever associate with me. Secondly, to say it was an epic failure would be an understatement.

Lastly, and most importantly, what if the man who most definitely had nefarious intentions was *also* a Shifter? Or a Witch? What if he was trained in martial arts or an MMA fighter and had been taught to do more than swing wildly while screaming at the top of his lungs?

Over the years, I'd devised a test for every one of my five senses to see if a person was hiding their Paranormalness. The sad thing was I'd never gotten very good at any of them, and if push came to shove, only visual confirmation worked for me.

Suffice it to say, I was screwed. Then it came to me. I had a Black Swan sharing my soul. What the hell was wrong with me? Did I really need sleep

that badly? It wasn't like I could forget she was there. Yet, I had for a few brief moments.

"Hey, Babs, we got trouble."

"Wh-What?" She yawned. *"Why are you bothering me? You told me to..."*

"Hush and listen."

"Why I never..."

"Please just listen."

Opening my senses wide, I waited for her to respond. Instead of being helpful, she hissed, *"Okay, speak. I'm just sittin' here like a bump on a log. Are you gonna say something, or can I go back to sleep?"*

"No, you cannot..."

The sounds of his shoes hitting concrete stopped my snarky comment and alerted me to the fact that whoever had invaded my Morgue had reached the main exam area. Sure, tile would've been my choice of floor covering, too. But cement allowed us to hose it out after every autopsy. It was something I hadn't been thankful for until that moment, not because of its efficiency but because it gave me a way to track his progress through the Morgue.

Then came that voice again. Shivers skittered up and down my spine. *"Aw, come on, Betsey Sue Bloomfield. Come out and see me."*

"Who the hell is that?" Babs growled, suddenly – albeit a little late – wide awake. *"And what the hell does he want with you? Doesn't he know you already have a Mate?"*

"Apparently not," I snarled right back. *"Now, you see why I..."*

"Come out. Come out, wherever you are."

I had been right! My creepy feelings were absolutely correct. That weird voice was there for me. It wasn't that I'd ever doubted the fact. It was more that I'd hoped he'd somehow gotten his wires crossed and was looking for someone else. I know it was farfetched. This was the Morgue. There are not many ways a person could mistake where they were. But doggone it, I was

grasping at straws! Give a girl a break.

The longer I cowered in the darkness, the angrier I got with myself. No, *not* at the man stalking me in my very own place of employment.

I was humiliated. What if I actually met my demise on my knees, in the dark, wearing yoga pants, sporting a ponytail, and without a lick of lipstick. It was simply not befitting the woman, the doctor, the Coroner of the five Parishes that made up The Swamp in the great state of Louisiana - aka Betsey Sue Bloomfield.

Trying to decide how to get out of the file room, find a weapon of some sort, and sneak up on the creep in the other room, I pouted. Of course, Babs had to get in a jab. *"Girl, you need to get up and get out there. Just let me loose. I'll jerk a knot in that asshole's tail he'll never untie."*

"What if he doesn't have a tail?"

"On. My. Goddess," the Black Swan with whom I shared my soul ground out. *"You cannot be that obtuse."*

"No, but I can...."

Before I could finish my fantastic comeback, the intruder called out again. Thankfully, my quick reflexes kicked in, or the bastard would've heard my squeak of surprise. As it was, I'd slapped my hand over my mouth so hard I *knew* I would have swollen lips for a few hours.

"Wanna play Hide and Seek, my love? Far be it for me to stop your fun. I *know* I've had mine. Should I count?" There was a pause and then, "One..."

Frustration made me want to pace, to scream, to lose my religion. Who the hell was it? Why couldn't I place his voice?

"Two..."

The son of a bitch was taunting me. He was playing some sick, homicidal game, and I was the prize. Why was I the prize? None of it made any sense, and that pissed me off more than being hunted. I had to do something. He could... No, check, he *wouldn't* win. Knowing he would continue his count any second, I took a deep breath, let it out very slowly, closed my eyes, and

focused.

“You got this, Betsey Sue,” Babs reassured. *“And I’m not going anywhere.”*

Now, any other time, I would've been a smart ass and reminded my alter ego that she couldn't go anywhere else without me. But I appreciated the sentiment and that she genuinely was always there for me when the going got tough.

“Thanks,” I mentally whispered.

“You welcome,” she encouraged, *“Don’t forget, you can always let me out to kick some ass.”*

“I’ll keep that in mind, but this is the Morgue.”

And I did, but for some reason, call it my 'spidey senses', I knew that letting the Black Swan with whom I shared my soul out wasn't the right move. There was no doubt Babs could handle herself and pretty much anything that came at us, but the little voice in the back of my mind that I always attributed to the Witch I was sure lived there was screaming, *“Not yet! No feathers! Wait!”*

Following her advice, I needed one more deep breath, and then I would be ready.

Then I heard, *“Three...”*

And just like that, all the pieces of the puzzle I'd been trying to solve came together. I don't know if it was that one second of absolute calm and focus, the fact that the information in my brain had stewed long enough to come to a boil, or even if it was because it felt like Babs and my little Witch were finally on the same page, but it didn't matter. Whatever happened had given me clarity. The thing that had been driving me crazy slid into place, and I could see it all as clearly as the perfectly pert nose on my face.

It was the names! The names of the men each of the ladies had been introduced to and subsequently met days or weeks before their deaths. My almost photographic memory replayed their names in order... Bloom White,

Bradford Woolery, Breward Wilson, Bruce Walling, Brawnley Waters, and Beauford Wales. Every stinkin' one of them had the same initials. There was no way that was a coincidence. I wanted to kick myself for not seeing it sooner. How did I miss all those dudes whose monograms were identical?

“Four...” Sounded from what I was pretty sure was the beginning of the hallway right off the wall of cold chambers.

The sound of his voice triggered a slide show of the photos of family members, friends, and even one picture the same matchmaking service had sent to each of the women. My mind was so focused at this point that it took less than a second for me to zero in on the one undeniable similarity... *their eyes!* They were all the same. Even with colored contacts, glasses, squinting, and one sporting a baseball cap, there was no hiding it... *they were all the same man!*

Oh, the son of a bitch had done his best to camouflage his appearance, but facial reconstruction is one of my fortes, and the shape of the eyes is the single most crucial feature to getting it right. At that moment, I could've kissed Professor Hawkins for the three-week lab practical on eyes. Had it not been for that, I might've missed it.

“Five...” My ever-present intruder called out. He was getting closer. I had to do something. It was time to take a stand. Now that I knew the key to solving the murders, I *had* to get the hell outta dodge and call J.B. and Will. Whoever this idiot was and whatever he wanted with me would have to wait. We had to get this killer before he struck again.

Crawling to the farthest cabinet, I painstakingly opened the bottom drawer, careful not to let it squeak. Reaching in, I prayed to God the mini fire extinguisher Bobby had ordered by mistake was still in there. My hand closed over the cold aluminum canister, and I didn't even try to stop the nervous grin that crossed my face. All the chemistry classes I'd taken told me the pressurized nitrogen was so cold it would burn that asshole's skin everywhere it touched. It would also make it hard for him to breathe, especially if I got it

right in his face.

“Six... I'm only gonna count to ten, my sweet. I've waited so long for us to be together. I'm not sure I can stand the anticipation a moment longer.”

His statement made my skin crawl, but it also spurred me into action. Holding the extinguisher to my chest, I scooted to the door and used the tall, thin filing cabinet just inside the room as cover. Poking my head around the doorframe and pulling it back just as quickly, I tried to get a glimpse of my 'admirer.'

After three attempts, I figured out that it wasn't gonna work. I was going to have to fly blind. It occurred to me that I looked like a turtle popping its head in and out of its shell as I peeked around the corner, and I almost laughed out loud. No, it wasn't the right place or time, but I was freaking the hell out. It was laugh or cry, and I damned sure didn't have time for runny mascara.

“Seven...” His footsteps hit the ceramic tile of the hall I was presently squatting at the end of, and my brain went into overdrive. I had to come up with a plan. It was now or never, and never was not in my vocabulary.

I took another deep breath and stood, clutching the canister to my chest like a life preserver. I'd already pulled the pin and had the hose in one hand. When this was all over, I planned to write a letter of praise to the person who put the trigger on the hose.

It was designed for someone to put a small fire out with one hand, but taking out my would-be attacker in the same fashion was more important to me. Hey, a life saved is a life saved, and I liked my head on my shoulders. My super speed and the element of surprise, along with my handy dandy fire extinguisher, were going to save my Magical life. I just knew it.

Over and over, I mentally repeated, “*I will get out of this alive. I will get out of this alive.*”

“Yes, you damned sure will,” Babs hissed. “*I don't plan on startin' at the beginning ever again. Training you to my way of thinking was hard enough.*”

“Thanks,” I snorted. “*I think.*”

“Eight...” echoed through the halls of the Morgue.

The butthead was still counting, and I could tell he was just over ten feet from where I stood. It was a now-or-never situation, and I was going for it.

Taking three steps back, I got a running start and flew out the door to the right as if I had let Babs come forward, and I had wings. Using my slipping and sliding socks to propel me around the corner, the momentum pushed me toward the main exam room. If I could just get there, I would be able to get to my office, lock myself in, and call the calvary, aka the Sheriff, and my Mate.

“What the f....?” echoed behind me, closely followed by a chuckled, “So, milady wants to add a game of catch to our fun. Beautiful.”

It was the only warning I got before flying through the air, headlong towards the thick, metal side of the cold chambers. Closing my eyes, I tried to tuck and roll and do whatever I could to keep my skull from smacking the unforgiving surface.

To my shock, the impact never came. Instead, I found my back smashed to my attacker’s front. Suddenly, I was held in place by two arms whose lack of muscle tone was the perfect disguise for their incredible strength. Worst of all, the jerk had taken my fire extinguisher. The sound of it hitting the floor was yet another reminder that I was trapped like a rat.

"Now I have you, and I'm never letting you go," my captor whispered in my ear.

At the risk of making y'all a little queasy, I have to admit that I threw up just a little in my mouth. I’m not sure if it was the concentration it took to *not* toss my cookies all over myself and the jerk holding me or the copious amounts of adrenalin running through my body. Still, whatever it was, I immediately knew who the asshole trying to stop my beating heart was.

“Bernard Witherspot? From the T.P. records room? What the hell?”

“And she gets it in one,” he responded, heading through the exam room towards my office. “I knew our love was meant to be. You even recognize

me from just my voice.”

Now, I should’ve thought about one fact way sooner than I did, but I was kind of busy wondering what the wacko nerd boy who filed all my official reports and was always playing some computer game on his P.C. had planned for me. But when I did wonder how he was seeing in the dark, it happened at the same time that I saw what could only be described as a torture device.

I barely recognized the utilitarian wheelchair from the back of one of our ambulances. The medieval modifications were nothing short of frightening. Bernard had added thick leather shackles where my wrists and ankles would be when I sat in the chair. They were lined with what I had to guess was silver since it was the only metal that could hurt us Paranormal Beings, and it was shining like the Star of Bethlehem. There were also five separate lengths of silver chain, one where my neck would be and two on each side that would wrap around my torso.

Thankfully, death wouldn’t happen instantaneously. There would be time for someone – *anyone* at this point – to come to my aid. Silver poisoning and its subsequent death took prolonged exposure. There was time, but I didn’t like it. Nor did I like the thought of the pain that accompanied silver poisoning.

Just the thought of being burned everywhere the caustic metal touched made my skin crawl. I had to think of a way to avoid getting strapped into the asshole’s wheeled death trap.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Babs asked her usual air of superiority back with a vengeance.

“What? Just tell me. I don’t have time for games.”

“Say it with me,” she drew out the words. *“Bernard is a....”*

“Vampire! Holy shit! Bernard is a Vampire.”

“I knew you would get there,” the Swan with whom I shared my soul sassed. *“Nobody can say you’re the dull crayon in the box.”*

Sadly, Babs had every right to

give me a rasher and a half of shit. The signs were all there. He could see in the dark... *check*. After all, he'd caught me without breaking a sweat. He had super strength... *check*. For sure, he held me tighter than my Spanx at Cora's wedding. He knew silver was the only true weakness any Supernatural had. Well, duh, he'd created a chair-lined torture device with it.

Son of a bitch! I thought we were looking for a Shifter. How had I missed that our killer was a Vamp? Better yet, when had a Vamp returned to T.P. and stayed under the radar for so long?

No, we most assuredly did not throw them out or make them leave. In fact, Vampires and Shifters had coexisted in The Swamp for centuries. All was hunky-dory. They did their thing. We did our thing. All was good. Then, one day, about a hundred-and-fifty years ago, they got a new Queen – Her Majesty Marie. None of us had ever heard of her. All we knew was that she'd come from 'the old country' and did not like the weather in Louisiana.

From one night to the next, all the Vamps had packed up and left, never to be heard from again. As a matter of fact, I'm pretty sure one of the Maidens of Mayhem, Monique, a Mockingbird Shifter who used to be a high fashion model, was good friends with one or two. As far as I knew, she tried to stay in touch, but her fangy friends did not. After a couple of years, she gave up.

So, when had one come back, and of all people, how was it, Bernard? I saw him at least three times a week and never ever never got the sense that he was anything other than the dude – *the human dude* - in Country Records who played video games.

"Let me get you on your throne," he chirped, his happiness making me want to barf – for real this time. "Then we can talk."

In the blink of an eye, I was thrown in the wheelchair, shackled, chained, and effectively immobilized, all before barely registering any movement at all, and that's saying something. I've been a Shifter and a Witch since the day I was born. No, I am not going to tell you how long that was. A lady never

tells her age.

Even if I had thought of running – which I hadn't because it was something I reserved for the semi-annual sale at Macy's – Bernard was too quick. It didn't matter that the enhanced abilities of Paranormal Beings only got stronger over the years, that little fang boy was faster than I ever thought about being, and that pissed me right off.

"You should've let me out," Babs complained. *"I would've pecked his eyes out."*

"Do you really think now is the time to say, 'I told you so'?"

"My dear Betsey Sue, it is ALWAYS time to say, 'I told you so' where you are concerned."

"Shut. Up. Babs."

Tuning out my bossy, sassy, and absolutely infuriating alter ego, I looked at Bernard and kinda-sorta asked, "How did you...?"

The fanged geek looked very pleased with himself as he adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses and explained. "I *knew* we were meant to be together from the moment I saw you. You're beautiful, intelligent, witty, and have a great sense of humor."

"Lookie there, Betsey," Babs snorted sarcastically. *"The Vampire who has lost his mind thinks you're cool."*

There was no use telling the Black Swan with whom I shared my soul to shut up for the millionth time. She would never do it, and I had bigger fi – I mean, Vampires to fry.

Of course, said fanged phenom was still talking. "I tried everything I could to get you to notice me, but nothing worked. I knew if you gave me a chance, you would see what I do, that we were meant to be together. I mean, I knew you were special. Why would the unmistakable scent of patchouli and Magic linger after you'd been in the office? And why was I the only one who could smell it? I read loads of books, and they all said a Paranormal Being would know his Mate in many ways, and one was by her scent. No, I wasn't

Supernatural, but I'd always thought I was meant to be. I scented you, didn't I? The soft, feminine perfume that was so you, Betsey Sue. I asked around, but nobody knew much about your family – except that you and your mom lived in New York after the death of your dad."

Bowing his head, Bernard looked up over the Coke bottle lenses of his glasses and reverently whispered, "I'm so sorry for your loss. I'm sure he was a good man. After all, he had to be because you are so special."

To which I responded, ignoring most of what he said but wanting to be polite to the Vampire who might be thinking about killing me, "Thank you, but it was a long time ago."

And that's when Babs trumpeted, *"Are you seriously having a conversation with the dude who has you strapped to a chair he covered with silver?"*

"I am trying to buy some time."

"You need to let me out. I'll make quick work of the nerdy Vamp, and we can go get shrimp tempura."

"Nice! You're thinking about your stomach at a time like this."

"I am always thinking about my stomach."

"Well, think of a way out of this because with all this silver, I can't do anything, and neither can you."

"Well, shit, I hate it when you're right."

Tuning back into Bernard's monologue, I was just in time to hear him say, "I tried to get to know you better before making my intentions known. It took careful planning. Then, the day of the fire at your friend Cora's house, I saw you making eyes at that musclebound Wyvern and knew I would have to get creative."

"You were at the fire?"

"I sure was. I was in the tall weeds, just watching and waiting. But that's beside the point." Holding up the index finger of his right hand, it was as if he was conducting a string quartet as he continued. "One night, I'm sure you'll

remember it, a thug tried to steal your bag. I was running to your rescue when you hauled off and flat-hand punched him right in the chest. The guy flew backward into the alley, and you were gone in the blink of an eye. I looked all over, but you had simply disappeared, leaving a trail of sweet Magic and heavenly patchouli. All I could do was start following you more closely.”

“Of course, that was all you could do.”

“It was,” he happily nodded. “I’m so glad you agree. Anyway, I spent the next five nights watching everything you did at work, at home, when you were talking to the ladies you call your Flock – *everything*, and finally, my persistence paid off.

“You and the Crow Shifter – I think her name is Colleen...”

“It is.”

“*Why are you answering him?*” Babs squawked so loud I thought my brain might turn to gray goo and leak out my ears. “*Stop paying attention to him and get us the hell out of here.*”

"I have to listen to him to know what he's planning so I know how to get us the hell out of here. Thank you very much."

“Oh.”

“*Yeah, oh,*” I snapped. “*So, hush up and help me listen.*”

“*Gotcha, Chief.*”

It was the first time she'd ever called me Chief. Either the Black Swan Shifter who shared my soul had lost what was left of her mind, or she was as scared as I was. If I was a betting woman – which I was not – I would've put money on B – and Babs being scared had never ever never happened before.

“You were saying,” I coaxed Bernard to keep talking because if he was talking, he wasn't slitting my throat.

“Yeah, you and Colleen the Crow were walking home from dinner and took a detour through the park. I remember wondering why two women would do that, and then I heard her say, “Go on, Bets. Try it now. I'm sure you've gotten better.”

"And you saw me turn the leaves on Old Oakey red, then purple, then back to green?"

"I did." Bernard squealed with delight. "Well, that could only mean one thing: you were not only a Black Swan Shifter but also a Witch. After some serious research and a lot of trial and error, it was obvious I could not be a Witch. Everything went horribly wrong whenever I tried lighting a candle with Magic. So, I took some time off from work and went on vacation to Sighișoara, Romania."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did," he squealed. Yes, my attacker literally squealed like a little girl. "It was where all the books said Vlad the Impaler became Dracula. The trip was a breeze, and getting into Vlad's castle was even easier. Did you know you can rent it out but the day?"

I shook my head because I simply could not speak.

"Yes, you can, and I did. Three days in the deepest catacombs, surrounded by every artifact and ancient text Vlad had ever owned, and I had the answers I needed. I followed the map, found the crypt of Vlad the Impaler's first victim, and took his sternum."

"Following the instructions to the letter, I boiled the bone, extracted what was left of the marrow, then cooked up the potion that would turn me into a Child of the Night with a few unique herbs that only grow in the castle grounds. The hardest part was waiting for almost a week while it fermented. Then there was the flavor. It tasted like cow shit mixed with vinegar and rotten eggs smells, but I persevered, and everything worked out just like it always meant to.

"Should you tell him that he could have gone out and gotten a Werewolf to bite him?" Babs asked.

"Absolutely not," I shot back. *"We are never to reveal to anyone other than another Shifter than Werewolves are bitten, and Wolf Shifters are born. Hell, most of the younger of us don't even know that."*

"Yeah, but it would really piss your not-so-secret admirer off, and he might make a mistake."

"Or he might slit my throat and throw me off the roof into the bushes."

"Oh, yeah, that is his go-to move, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Now, hush unless you have something constructive to add," I snapped, then tried to pay attention to Bernard's droning with all my might.

"Well, I guess there were a few hiccups. Like I didn't know I would be so hungry when I woke up. The ancient texts said nothing about that, but I was famished. My head felt like it weighed a ton, and my heart only beat about three times a minute. Did you know a Vampire's heart still beats? Well, it does. So, now you have confirmation. Anyway, it didn't take long before I realized I was starving."

"Not even thinking, I grabbed a protein bar and an energy drink out of my backpack and gobbled them down. I swear, they didn't make it all the way to my stomach before I was projectile vomiting all over the catacombs."

Holding up his hand, Bernard shook his head and looked really apologetic as he whispered, "Sorry for the visual, but I figured since you're a doctor and the Medical Examiner, it was okay."

Pausing, his look was expectant, and it took me a minute to stammer, "O-Oh, yeah, I see what you mean."

Apparently, that was all he was waiting on because the crazy newbie Vamp started rambling all over again. "Not even stopping to return the keys to the rental agent or collect my deposit, I flew straight home and began to plan. I knew that whatever I did to win you over would have to be a grand gesture. It would have to cater to your amazing intellect. Any man can tell you that you're beautiful and send you flowers or sing you a song, but I was going to make a lasting impression that showed not only you but the whole world the depth of my love for you."

"That's when I came up with the idea of a scavenger hunt, but it couldn't

be just any scavenger hunt. It had to be just for you..."

My cell phone binged, cutting off the crazy Vampire boy's rambling. I had a text message. While he went to check my phone, something that usually pissed me off but on that occasion had me thanking the Great Goddess for the momentary silence, I took my first real breath since being captured.

I had never noticed how much Bernard could talk. Then again, he never said anything more than, 'Hi, Miss Betsey. Here to drop off files? What Parish? What Department? I'll get it done. Thank you. See you next time.' Yep, it was the same thing every time.

Sadly, the boy had found his voice, and apparently, he was never ever never going to shut the hell up. Had it not been for the brief pause while he checked my phone, I was sure I would beg him to kill me. My ears had to be bleeding, not to mention the lethargy that felt like hundred-pound weights hanging off my every appendage from silver poisoning settling into my bones.

Now, here is where you get to say 'bad Betsey Sue'...bad, bad Black Swan Shifter, even worse Witch, and most of all, horrible valedictorian of everywhere from which you ever graduated. Because I should've been using the time Bernard was rambling on and on and *on* to think about why he was taking the time to tell me the story in the Morgue.

Why wasn't he hurrying to get me to his secret lair? Why was I strapped to a chair when he had the power of the original - albeit totally untrue - Vampire and could obviously subdue me without all the theatrics? (No, Vlad the Impaler was not the first Vampire, but that story must wait. Or, maybe my friend, Veronica, will call you. If I make it out of this alive, I'll call her.) Yeah, I should've been asking all those questions and a shitload more, but I was thinking about how I might never see Will again and how stupid I'd been not to realize Bernard freaking Witherspot had a crush on me. At that very moment, I immediately forgot about the text message and began to internally

freak out.

Wait! Bernard Witherspoon! B.W.! Holy crap! My eyes flew to the rolling bulletin board where all six pictures of the victims hung, just as I'd left them. Then I looked at the mess of papers strewn all over the floor and saw the one with all the names of the men those ladies met before their deaths, verifying what I'd already solved. Each man's initials were B.W. The last piece of the puzzle clicked into place just as Bernard walked out from behind my desk and took his place in front of me.

“Son of a bi...”

Clapping and hopping on his toes like an idiot, Bernard squealed for what felt like the umpteenth time. Honest to the Great Goddess, that boy squealed like a little girl who'd just gotten a pony for her tenth birthday. Had I not been in a predicament of my own, I would've offered him advice on acting like a Supernatural Being and not a complete and total dork.

Sadly, I was up shit creek without a paddle and had no time to advise anyone. Finally, the squealing and clapping stopped. Sadly, Bernard once again started to speak.

“You figured it out. I knew you would. You are the smartest woman I’ve ever met. You are a true match for me.” Kneeling in front of me and kissing the back of my hands, which made me want to upchuck for the hundredth time in the last little bit, he continued, “I knew it was the perfect way to declare my intentions to you. Wasn’t the ‘B’ on their most intimate body part spectacular? It was my promise to you of all the nights we would spend consummating our love. Bernard and Betsey Sue forever. B + B for the win. All that's left is getting your mother's blessing, and we'll live happily ever after.”

It took a few seconds for me to digest everything I'd just figured out, along with everything the whackadoo kneeling before me had said. It was absolutely horrifying. I was so sad to know I had, no matter how inadvertently, played a part in taking the lives of six remarkable women.

The only way I could even begin to make it right was to make sure somehow, some way, someone caught the lunatic who thought he loved me and chopped his head off. Of course, I had no idea if that was how to kill a Vampire sired by some potion made from the sternum of Vlad the Impaler's first victim, but it was worth a try.

All that was left was for me to get proof. Moving to the left in my seat to keep my butt from falling asleep, I remembered the overhead recorder in the main exam room and, more importantly, the fact that Bobby had changed the 'begin recording' vocal command to 'hit it, baby.' The day he'd done it, I vowed to make him pay in ways he'd yet to imagine, but all I wanted to do at that moment was hug him and pledge my undying fealty to his constant need to play practical jokes on me. All I needed to do was get Bernard the Dipshit to wheel me out there.

Putting on what my Flock called my 'happy princess face,' the one when my lips were curled in a sweet smile while my brain was filling with all the ways I could slap the person I was smiling at silly. The people who knew me well had great fun telling me they could always see it in my eyes. I was hoping Crazy Vamp Boy couldn't.

"Vigil," I cooed. "Can we please go into the exam room? It's so crowded in here. I'm getting lightheaded."

Jumping up like a doting boyfriend, something that once again made my stomach roll, Bernard immediately wheeled me to the center of the room and ran back to my office. I wasn't sure what he was up to, but I used the time to say, "Hit it, baby."

The telltale click of the recorder sounded, and thankfully, the psycho was too busy pushing the rolling bulletin board out with us to hear it. I had no idea what he was doing and honestly didn't want to think about what he was capable of beyond the murders he'd already committed.

Hurrying before he changed his mind and moved me away from the recorder, I began my interrogation. "I understand you wanted to get my

attention, but why did you have to kill all those women? Wasn't there another way to catch my eye and declare your intentions without them having to die?"

Turning, with a genuine look of confusion on his face, he shook his head before answering. "No, darling. They *had* to die. You're the Medical Examiner. They were gifts for you to show you that no matter what our future holds, I'll never make you quit your job. I value your mind as much as I lust after your gorgeous curves."

Gross does not begin to cover what I was feeling. I could feel the chunks rising. I know I keep saying that, but it bears repeating. I want to be sure you understand how revolting the most recent developments of my life truly were. Only the numbness that was taking over from my continued exposure to silver kept my last cup of coffee in my stomach. I prayed I could keep my wits about me long enough to get his confession on tape.

"How did you pick them, Bernard Witherspot?" I knew it wasn't very smooth, but I had to say his whole name for the record.

The weenie mistook it as a term of endearment and gushed. "Oh, Betsey Sue, I'm so glad you like hearing my name. I cannot wait until I can call you Mrs. Witherspot." He paused as I braced for his answer, then he went on. "To answer your question, I found women that reminded me of you. Of course, they were merely poor imitations of the real thing, but they served their purpose."

Well, shit! Why did he have to go and say that? I was already drowning in guilt. And to be honest, the only thing those women and I had in common was that with the Magic of the Great Goddess, we could grow feathers, fur, fangs, or a whole host of other things.

But that didn't matter. Bernard could think whatever he wanted to think as long as he kept confessing. I had to press on, had to get it all on tape before I passed out, so I asked, "And why drain all their blood before throwing them out the window?"

“Isn’t it obvious, my love? You needed to be challenged. It had to be a puzzle for you to solve. This was to be *your* New York Times Sunday crossword, made especially for you with the prize of an eternity of love and devotion at its conclusion.”

“But you didn’t wait for me to solve it. You came early. Why?”

Bernard once again knelt before me, but this time, he pouted like a little boy, bottom lip pushed out and all. Tilting his head to the side and batting his eyes, he said, "Please don't be cross with me, but I bugged your computer as well as the Sheriff's. J.B. – and that stupid Wyvern – were getting too close. He, like you, looked at the pictures of ‘the men’ the ladies recently dated and was planning to come to you for your expert opinion. I couldn’t take the chance that you two would figure it out *together*, and he would somehow hide you from me."

Shock didn't begin to describe what I was feeling. The sick, stupid son of a bitch kneeling before me had literally killed six women just to get my attention. It was mind-boggling. I had no words, yet I needed to keep him talking. I opened my mouth to ask another question when Bernard pulled a diamond ring the size of the DFW airport out of his pocket.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I borrowed this from Misty Dawn. She said it was a family heirloom, and since she was the last of their line, I thought we’d get better use out of it.”

Clearing his throat, he took my left hand and looked into my eyes. The icky, nasty nothingness I saw staring back at me was terrifying. Whatever it was, a Spirit, a Demon, or the Devil himself had a serious hold of Bernard and, from the looks of it, wasn't letting go. The evil entity had found his true match in the squirrely little file clerk who was attempting to propose marriage to me. Someday, if I made it out alive, I would have to tell Mom and the Coven she formed a century ago about the catacombs and the tomes in Vlad the Impaler's castle. That shit packed some serious mojo and needed to be contained.

“Your life just gets weirder by the minute,” Babs groaned.

“How about you come up with a way to unweird it?”

Before she got a chance to answer, Bernard was proposing. “Dr. Betsey Sue Bloomfield, will you do me the unquestionable honor of being my Mate, my wife, and the love of my life forever and ever?”

For the only time in my entire life, I was at a loss for words. My mouth refused to open. It was as if the silver had seeped into my brain and was taking away my motor functions, beginning with my jaw. Looking anywhere but at the idiot kneeling before me, I caught sight of movement just outside the large glass windows lining the right back corner of the exam room.

The thought of actually escaping the horrible situation I was in with my head and *without* being engaged to Bernard forced me to gasp. The idiot thought it was because I was caught up in the moment, which, in hindsight, worked out perfectly. But my brain was a little tired, and the silver racing through my veins was working overtime.

Then I saw him – my Wyvern in shining armor and gasped one more time. I swear to the Great Goddess, Bernard swooned. I wanted to roll my eyes and tell him to get a grip, but I simply could not take my eyes off my magnificent Mate.

Faster than I could track, Will sailed across the exam room. Catching Bernard around the neck, he flailed him against the far wall. The impact left a man-sized crater in the block wall and would've killed an average human, but of course, Bernard, the idiot, wasn't an average human. Hell, he wasn't even a normal Vampire, if there is such a thing. Well, there is, and she's my friend, but that's a whole other story.

The battle that ensued could only be described as epic. Will and Bernard threw one another all over the County Morgue while I was shackled to a wheelchair, quickly approaching unconsciousness. It was a Battle Royale if I'd ever seen one – which you must know I had. A Shifter – especially one of the Universe's Lieutenants – second only to the Dragons, Her Winged

Warriors – fighting a Vampire. It was on a whole new level.

Fighting to stay awake, my vision narrowed to a hazy circle about a quarter the size of my usual field, then blinked in and out with ever-growing frequency. Before I passed out, my last thought was how thoughtful it was of both men to keep the fight from me. They were far enough away that I never even felt the breeze from them throwing each other about.

The last thing I remembered was whispering, "In case I die, I love you, Will Waterford, you sexy Wyvern."

PART II

WILL TAKES CHARGE. WELL, AT LEAST UNTIL BETSEY WAKES UP



Twelve hours, more burn salve than I knew existed, three IV bags full of 'all the good stuff' to clean away the silver poisoning from my Mate's system – or so I was told umpteen times, a whole lot of 'quality' time with a gruff Eagle Shifter named Edna who was also a very competent Nurse and loved my little Witchy Black Swan almost as much as I did, and I was ready for Betsey Sue to wake up. I needed to see her sweet baby blues and hear her beautiful voice. I had to know she was okay.

When I saw her strapped to a chair and all beaten up, I damned near lost my mind. It was all I could do not to get scaly, winged, and beastly on that little wanker's ass. I wanted to rip the son of a bitch limb from limb, set the parts on fire, then drown what was left before freezing the ashes and dropping the lump of useless shite in the deepest chasm of the ocean I could find.

To say I was pissed was a gross understatement in every possible way. As my dear old ma would've said, *“My blood was bloody boilin’, and I wanted to kick the tosser in his arse.”*

In case no one mentioned it, I was born in Wales, then spent my formidable years on the Isle of Skye learning what it meant to be one of the Universe's Chosen Lieutenants – a Wyvern Warrior. We are what is known to all Paranormal Beings as a backup for the mighty Dragon Guard, and I would not have it any other way.

Sadly, none of that kept the bloody bastard, Bernard Witherspot, from getting his grubby little hands on my Mate. I was madder than a wet hen – one of my Mate's favorite sayings and one I now understand the meaning of – when I saw the sallow pallor of her skin and red streaks of silver poisoning snaking up and down her arms and legs.

On the heels of my unfathomable fury came a shitload of guilt. Betsey Sue was my Mate – as I have said repeatedly and will continue to say because I love that little Witchy Black Swan with all my heart and soul. She was mine to protect. When had I taken my eye off the ball? How had I missed all the signs? FUCK ME! The asshole had even carved his initial into a very personal place on all his victims. I should have figured it out from the start. I was just a fucking eejit. That's all there was to it.

“And if that’s not bad enough,” the Wyvern with whom I shared my soul grumbled. *“You...”*

“Yes, yes, yes, dammit! I somehow let that little bastard, Bernard Witherspot, get away,” I seethed. *“Yeah, I know I was there. Thanks for the pep talk, Old Man,”* I added. Then, promptly shut out whatever else he was about to grumble in my direction.

I would’ve liked to say the Tallulu Parish Sheriff's Department made a mistake, but I knew they hadn't. I'd been working with them for long enough to know they were good – damn good. And more to the point, J.B. St. Sabin, the Sheriff, did not make mistakes, nor did he allow it from his officers. He had one goal – to keep the citizens of his Parish safe - and he kept his word and then some.

So, how did the stupid little asshole escape?

"Watch out, Laddie," Tudful, the Wyvern King I mentioned before, sarcastically teased. "Don't go losing your temper. Our little Witchy Black Swan doesn't need a house full of water - even if it is our house."

"That's all up to you, Old Man. I don't control the waterworks anymore."

"Says the man who flooded his mother's cabin on the banks of Eryri Forest in Snowden on one very cold winter's night. I thought..."

"You thought it was hilarious, but I was only thirteen," Will ground out through gritted teeth. "You always had all the power. You only let me think I did in some feeble attempt to teach me a lesson."

"Indeed, but I wasn't the one in charge that time. You told me to fuck off, and fuck off is exactly what I did."

"Again," Will growled. "I was only thirteen, and you made me pay for having the crazy hormonal temper of a teenager. You knew damned good and well what was about to happen and could've stopped it but chose not to."

"Your training had already started. You'd heard all the stories of what we Wyvern Shifters could do, you..."

"Okay, okay, okay, I know I'm never going to win this argument. I've apologized at least a million times over the last five-hundred-and-sixty-two years. You remember because you remember everything, but in case you forgot, that was exactly how long ago it was when I allegedly tried to flood the cabin on the River Dees and..."

"There was no allegedly about it, Lad, and we both know that. You lost the plot and your mind all at the same time, then..."

Ignoring the Wyvern King, the words floating from my mind to Tudful's at record speed, I kept right on going. *"Then I had to clean it up the 'old fashioned way' with a bucket and a rag because, well, that was all there was back in those days. All the while, you could've stopped me from making the mess or, at the very least, cleaned it up with little more than a thought. But you most assuredly did not. No matter, for it was then that I learned to leave all the water, fire, ice, and flying to you. It keeps my hands clean. So, do not*

tell me...."

"What? Don't tell you what, Laddie? That just like then, you're so worked up at this very minute you might blow a gasket. Only this time, it's over that wee piece of shite gettin' away from us. I swear to the Great Goddess and the Universe that you might just override every bit of Magical, Mystical, and Enchanted Power I've got and start spewing water out of your ears?"

"Well, shit," Will snickered for the hell of it. "I hate it when you have a point."

"And yet, I find it ever so satisfying."

Holding in his laughter as not to wake his sleeping, recuperating Mate, Will couldn't help throwing back one last jab, *"Probably just as satisfying as I found it the time you lost your mind and blew ice on a house fire on the Isle of Skye."*

"The flames went out, didn't they?"

"No, they were frozen – not extinguished."

"Which meant they stopped rippin' through that house, right?"

"Aye," Will mentally chuckled. "The fire did stop."

"So, that means my winning streak remains unblemished."

"Whatever, Old Man, what...."

But that was as far as I got before Betsey Sue Bloomfield, the love of my life, the woman – part Black Swan Shifter and part Bloomfield Witch – that was made for me by the Universe and my One True Fated Mate catapulted out of bed like she'd been shot from a cannon. Crashing into me, she wrapped her arms around my neck, her legs around my waist, and started demanding, "Are you hurt? Are you bleeding? *Where* are you bleeding? Did that little bastard leave any marks on your gorgeous body? I swear to all that is holy, I will kick his ass up and down The Swamp a hundred times, then pull out his fangs and leave him for the Gators. Goddess knows, Gloria and her boys are always lookin' to hand out a good ass kickin', and I have it on good authority they haven't had any fresh meat in a month of Sundays. Glo and I have been

tight since her daddy ended up dead, and I found out it was from rancid chicken left by some dumbass poacher. Gator Shifters don't usually eat human flesh, but she'll chew Bernard up and spit him out if I ask her to." Hands going to my shoulders, her grip was nothing short of iron as she looked into my eyes and ground out through gritted teeth, "Talk to me, dammit. Talk to me now. I need to know that you're okay."

Words flew from her mouth so fast it took my ears a few seconds to catch up as I smiled so wide my cheeks hurt. Yes, I was most assuredly raising the risk level of bodily harm to my person to twenty-three on a scale of one to ten because I hadn't answered any of her questions, but I was just so happy my cute, sassy Mate was up and kickin', I couldn't hide my joy.

Of course, she went from demanding to irritated in less than a blink of an eye. Slamming the palms of her hands to my chest, she pushed with all her might, but I wasn't letting go. Pulling her closer, I laughed out loud as Betsey Sue squinted her eyes and growled through gritted teeth, "Screw you, William W. Waterford, just screw you and the horse you rode in on."

And that was all it took. I was more excited than I'd ever been in all my five-hundred-and-seventy-five years. I wanted my Witchy Black Swan more than I wanted my next breath. Betsey Sue Bloomfield was strong and sassy. She was independent and intelligent. She was powerful and unstoppable, and she was all mine.

Pulling her as close as possible, I held on tightly but was careful not to hurt her. Inhaling her scent, my heart soared. Feeling her soft curves against the hard planes of my body, I finally felt complete.

What had I been waiting for? Why had I taken it so slow? We weren't teenagers, for Cripe's sake. How often did I tell myself we had forever, so there was no use in rushing things? Yeah, sure, I thought it was the right thing to do, but what if I'd lost her without ever telling her how I felt?

"But we didn't lose her. Now, say what you have to say and make that woman ours for all time," Tudful demanded, his voice rough with arousal.

Looking deep into her eyes, I wanted the moment to last forever. Love and adoration filled every fiber of my being. I could no longer hold back. I had to tell her how I felt, and I had to tell her in that very second, or I feared I would explode, implode, and absolutely combust in every way possible.

“I love you, Betsey Sue Bloomfield soon-to-be-Waterford. Not a fleeting love or something that I only feel in my heart. Oh, hell, no! I love you all the way through, to the depths of my soul, in every part of my being, with no exceptions, no exclusions, no doubts, and no hesitation. I just love you so bad it hurts in all the right ways. And as soon as we put Bernard Fucking Witherspot behind bars – or a deep hole in the middle of The Swamp never to be heard from again – I’m gonna make you mine.”

"Oh, Will," she cooed with stars in her eyes and the scent of her arousal heavy in the air. "I love you, too, and I have since I laid eyes on you."

Laying my lips to hers, I poured everything I felt, everything I was, and everything we would ever be together into that one life-affirming kiss. Running the tip of my tongue across Betsey Sue's bottom lip, I could hardly hold back when she opened to me. I could feel her in every fiber of my being. She was in my heart and in my soul. We were one as the Universe and the Powers That Be always meant for us to be, and I wanted to make everything permanent. I needed to claim Betsey Sue, her Black Swan, and her Witch as mine and Tudful's for all time.

But first, I had to make sure she was ready.

Pulling back, I couldn't help but smile as I took in her kiss-swollen lips and lust-filled gaze. "Oh, Betsey Sue, you are the best thing in my life. I want you more than I've ever wanted anything, and if it's okay with you, I’m gonna love you like tomorrow might never come.”

“It’s more than okay, my love. It’s all I have ever wanted.”

Moving slower than I could ever remember being able to move, I walked us back while deepening the kiss. Stopping when I knew the back of my Mate's knees touched the mattress, I slid my hand under her slouchy, vintage

REO Speedwagon T-shirt. Closing my hand over her hardened nipple, I lightly squeezed her perfect breast. As she moaned and held on tighter, all thought flew from my mind, swallowed up in a flash of love, lust, and pure electricity only True Fated Mates can create.

Pulling the soft cotton over her head with my free hand, I looked at my Mate's nearly naked body, and in less than a heartbeat, my soul filled with the most empowering feeling I'd ever had. Knowing the woman I loved like something out of a silly kid's fairytale, who loved me the same way, was in my arms filled my soul with a true sense of peace. I knew my place in the universe, and it was by Betsey Sue's side.

I was sure beyond all doubt there was nothing in the world that would ever come between us, not even the crazy ass stalker who'd turned himself into a Vampire to try and take her from me, who'd killed women to impress her and was still on the loose. Nope, the tosser wouldn't win. I would get the bastard and make him pay, but first, I had to make my Witchy Black Swan mine for all time.

As if we shared the same thought, our lips once again met, but this time, it was anything but a slow burn. An explosion of love and passion threatened to consume us both. I fisted the fabric at her waist and pulled it tight. The rip of lace and silk set my blood on fire. Throwing the shredded clothing to the side, I slid my hands across her beautiful curves and closed them over the perfect globes of her ass. Lifting her feet off the floor, I pulled her hips to mine and growled deeply in my throat when her legs wrapped around my waist.

I could wait no longer. I was about to explode and still had not become one with the woman made for me by the Universe. Doing a one-eighty so quickly the room was nothing more than a blur, I took precisely three large strides before Betsey's back touched the cool, flat surface of the wall.

Leaving her lips for a split second, I used the Magic of the Ancient Wyvern to remove the clothes from my body. Returning to her welcoming

embrace felt like coming home.

It was as if my hands had a mind of their own. They sought to touch every inch of Betsey Sue's glistening, silken skin, to mark her with my scent, to be sure the world knew to whom she belonged and who would protect her with his very life.

No longer under my control, my mind awash with arousal and passion unlike anything I knew was possible, my hips pushed against hers. Holding my Mate in place, my erection slipped between the puffy, wet lips of my pussy.

Rolling my hips, I teased her clit on every pass as she shivered and shook in my arms. Our erotic dance continued pushing our shared excitement higher as the proof of Betsey's arousal wet the inside of her thighs and the front of mine.

Kissing down her neck and across her chest, my hands slid back under her ass as I lifted her higher still. I smiled against her heated skin when Betsey moaned at the loss of contact.

From one heartbeat to the next, I slipped her hardened nipple between my lips and gently bit down. Her shivers of ecstasy ignited my own as I slid one arm around her waist and let my other make its way south while simultaneously taking as much of her ample bosom into my mouth as I could.

Letting the tips of my Wyvern King's fangs just barely touch her tender skin, I teased her with what was to come by sliding first one, then almost immediately, two fingers deep inside her body. Thank God for the strength of the Ancient Wyvern because my knees nearly buckled as I slowly worked my fingers in and out of my One True Fated Mate.

Increasing the speed, I made sure to bump her excited clit and rub that special bundle of nerves deep inside her core on every pass. At the same time, my erection teased and touched, readying her for us to become one. Two fingers became three as her body heated to something just short of an inferno. I had to make sure she was ready to take all of me. There was no way

our first time together would be anything but a glorious culmination of all we were and would always be.

“Oh, Will... Oh, my Goddess... Oh, yes, yes, yes... Please, Will, please....”

As our minds became one, a tidal wave of Betsey Sue's need washed over me as she searched for the orgasm she so desperately needed. Rubbing circles over her clit with the pad of my thumb, I pressed harder at every turn, whispering, “Is that what you need? What you want, *fy un gwerthfawr*?”

No sooner had I called Betsey Sue 'my precious one' in Welsh, the language of my homeland, than her eyes snapped open, and her lusty gaze shot shockwaves through my body. I was sure I'd died and gone to Heaven. My Mate understood. What could be better?

"How about his, Sexy Wyvern Man?" Betsey Sue cooed, her smoky voice sending shivers down my spine. "*Rwy'n dy garu am byth a bob amser tan ddiwedd amser.*"

The world stopped on its axis as the depth of her love shone from those brilliant blue orbs and directly into me. She had spoken in the language of my ancestors, telling me that she loved me forever and always until the end of time.

I could wait no longer. Betsey Sue Bloomfield had to be mine within the next few seconds, or I would surely die having never claimed my One True Fated Mate. Pushing my fingers deep inside her, I used the palm of my hand to continue to tease her swollen clit as I bent all three fingers and worked the bundle of nerves at her core.

Waiting until her orgasm burst free, I pushed the tips of Tudful's fangs into the soft, supple skin of her breast. Betsey Sue screamed in ecstasy as her nails grew into the curved claws of her Black Swan, Babs, and pierced the skin of my shoulders. Magic, both Ancient Wyvern, beautiful Black Swan, and Powerful Bloomfield Witch, filled the room with bright flashes and triumphant shining waves.

The warm, coppery, sweet taste of her life's essence hit my tongue with the force of an entire Clan of Wyvern. We were truly one in every sense of the word. No one could ever tear asunder the bond I shared with my Mate.

Wanting – *Needing* more, I sucked harder. Every draw sent a whole new set of tremors through Betsey Sue's core, extending her orgasm until I felt her mind floating on a cloud of true bliss. Retracting my canines, I slowly removed my fingers from her, reveling in each new wave of tremors even the tiniest movement caused in the one the Universe had made for me.

Slowly, I let her slide down the wall, careful to keep my arms around her for support. Holding her close when my little Witchy Black Swan leaned into my chest and cuddled close, I lifted her into my arms and took her bed.

With my erection throbbing with need, I vowed to wait. Betsey Sue needed to heal. But my sweet Mate had other plans.

No sooner had I laid her head on the pillow than she ran her hand up my thigh and gently wrapped her elegant fingers around the part of my body begging for attention. Working hard not to let my eyes roll back in my head from the unmatched pleasure her touch gave me, I shook my head. "You need to take it easy, *fy nghariad*. I only want to hold you in my arms and thank the Great Goddess for the blessing that is you. We have forever and always to make love."

"Oh, no, Will Waterford," she sassed right back. Up on her knees and staring me in the eye, she kept right on going. "I mean, yes, we have forever and always, and I do love when you call me *your love* in Welsh, but I want to make love to you right this very minute. I want to mark you so the whole world sees you belong to me..." She pointed at the beautiful marks atop her breast that were taking the shape of feathered Wyvern wings – the Mating Mark that was the perfect symbol of who we were together. "...and that we belong to each other."

Shaking her head and moving closer, the motion causing her hand to move up my erection, my eyes did roll back in my head that time. I tried to

keep my cool. I knew she needed rest. And even more than that, I knew Edna would kill him if Betsey Sue wasn't at a hundred percent when she came to call the next day.

But it was hard – very hard – pun intended.

It took me three times to finally get the words out, and when I did, it sounded as if I'd just run to the peak of Sgùrr Alasdair, the highest mountain in the Black Cuillin on the Isle of Skye without the aid of Tudful's wings or a drop of Magic. "You need... rest. Edna said silver poisoning... takes... time," I wheezed.

"Oh, no, darlin'," she cooed, her voice smoky, lusty, and full of the promise of a happily ever after. "Edna may be a great nurse, but I'm the doc, and all I need is *you*."

My eyes widened, and what little blood was left in my brain raised down south as Betsey Sue grinned from ear to ear while moving her hands up and down my erection. Moving closer still, she chuckled when my cock jumped in her hand, then leaned down and blew a soft, warm breath my way that had my heart racing and my knees threatening to buckle.

Ready to give in, knowing I would catch hell from Edna, Cora, and all the other girls in Betsey Sue's Flock, I was prepared to take my punishment if it meant making love to my Mate. With one knee on the bed and the other ready to follow along, I damned near had a heart attack when a knock at the door boomed like thunder, mine and my Mate's phones rang like the Bells of St. Mary's, and the large plate glass window lining the entire south side of our bedroom shattered in a million pieces.

A rock the size of a Wyvern egg landed in the middle of the room a split second before a Magical message danced in the air while spewing the scent of rotten eggs and cow shit in every direction.

I'm here to get what's mine, Lizard Boy. Send Betsey Sue out, and I'll let you live.

Sliding my dick out of Betsey Sue's hands, I had one arm around her

shoulders and the other behind her knees before the last shard of glass hit the floor. Holding her close to my chest, I barked, "Arms around my neck and hold on tight."

"Not till you grab that blanket," she shot right back. "Ain't no way everybody in Tallulu Parish and their grannies are gonna get a gander of my naked ass."

"Handle it, Tudful," I snapped mentally and aloud, and with the words still ringing in the air, my Mate and I were dressed.

"Well, shit, Tuds, my boy," Betsey Sue harshly chuckled. "You gotta teach me that trick."

"*Oh, hush, silly girl,*" Babs, the Black Swan with whom my Mate shared her soul, shot through all our minds. "*You know I can do parlor tricks any time, day or night, with my wings tied behind my back.*"

"*And looking quite beautiful while doing it,*" Tudful responded with a low grumble.

"*Can we play mental footsies and make eyes at each other after I find the little fucker who breakin' windows and makin' threats, and who's tryin' to break down the front door, and if they're the same person?*"

Not waiting for a response, I spun around, shot out the bedroom door, and raced towards the back exit. Another thundering knock at the front, and I roared, "Save the fucking door, Asshole."

The huge oak frame splintered as the door flew open with such force I heard the wall crack as the knob sunk deeply into the plasterboards. A wave of scorching breath damned near set my ass on fire as Duncan, one of my oldest friends, a Dragon Guardsman, the reason I was in Tallulu Parish, Louisiana in the first place, and the Mate of Betsey Sue's best friend, Cora bellowed, "Fuck you, too! I'm here to help."

"Then get a move on. We're headed to the...."

But that was as far as I got. As the sole of my boot hit the tile of the kitchen floor, it was instant replay time. Just like in the bedroom, the sliding

glass door at the back of my house quite literally exploded.

Shards of glass, pieces of metal, and more than a few broken boards from my redwood deck became a barrage of missiles, all headed for me and my Mate. Following through with my back foot, I kicked the chair in front of me out of the way. Dropping to my knees, I slid towards the table, yelled, "Hold on tighter," to Betsey Sue, whipped my hand from under her knees, and pushed the table on its side.

Using the thick wooden top for cover, I carefully set my Mate on the floor just as Duncan yelled incoming and landed in the space next to me. "J.B., Levi – Edna's Mate, and the whole Tallulu Parish Sheriff's Department are on the way. We just gotta..."

BOOM! CRASH! BOOM! BOOM!

With his words cut off by a series of explosions at the front of my house, Duncan and I locked eyes and gave each other a single nod. Turning to Betsey Sue, I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and whispered into her mind, "*Stay right here. Keep down and out of sight. I'll be right back.*"

"*The hell you say,*" she seethed. "*You fight. I fight. I'm no damsel in distress, buddy. I'm your Mate and your partner, and that's the way it's gonna be.*"

"*But you were just...*"

"*Shut up and make with the scales, Fly Boy. I smell a Vamp that needs a good old-fashioned ass kickin'!*"

And just like that, my wonderfully sassy, incredibly intelligent, and undoubtedly fearless Mate got to her feet, gave me a sassy wink, and went from the blond-haired, blue-eyed bombshell I loved with all my heart to a six-foot, finely feathered Witchy Black Swan with enough Magic to light up every runway at the Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport. With a shake of her tailfeathers and another wink for luck, she took a step back and waved her wing.

Taking my cue from the woman made for me by the Universe, I

welcomed the Mysticism of the Ancient Wyvern and the Enchantment that was uniquely King Tudful and let the Magic happen. From one breath to the next, I was covered in blue and silver scales, standing ten feet tall, and in the form of my Warrior Wyvern – think big ass Wolfman with scales instead of fur, who can breathe fire, water, ice, and pretty much anything you can think of, and whose wings are now like curved battleaxes with venomous claws on his back, and that's what a Warrior Wyvern is and so much more.

Looking to my left, I found a crimson Berserker Dragon - (See above for description but substitute Dragon for Wyvern.) - I knew to be my best friend, my brethren, none other than Duncan Scott, Dragon Guardsman, and the guy you wanted at your back in a fight. Another single nod, this one accompanied by a plume of smoke from both of us and we turned in unison toward the back of my house.

With one mighty foot in the air, I didn't even get as far as completing my first step before a tap on my shoulder had me spinning to the right. Eyes wide, her wings bent out the side, Betsey Sue's irritated voice flew through my mind. *"Where the hell are you goin' without me?"*

"I was hoping you'd stay here."

"Are you deaf?"

"No, I..."

"You just thought I was gonna be the dutiful little woman and hide while you take on the asshole Vampire who murdered six women just to get my attention and then tried to shove more silver than there is in all the mines of Mexico into my feathered behind?" Her wings flew out to the side and came right back down. *"Well, fuck that, Will Waterford. Just fuck that."*

Spinning on her beautifully webbed feet, the most wonderful woman in all the world gave another flap of her wings, took flight, and soared right out the hole in the back of my house that used to be a sliding glass door. Turning to Duncan, I stammered, *"Wh-What the h-hell was that?"*

"That, my friend, is part and parcel of being Mated to a Maiden of

Mayhem. Now, let's get out there before Bernard Witherspot blows up more than your house."

Following Duncan through the same hole Betsey Sue had just exited, I jumped off what was left of the redwood deck and hit the ground running. Pieces of sod, clumps of mud and sand, and branches from the fruit trees I'd planted in my backyard rained down as one explosion after another shook the ground.

The Swamp was alive with animals – both Shifter and Non – either scrambling for cover or preparing to defend their homes. I scanned the darkness once... Twice... Three times but couldn't see the little fucker anywhere.

I knew he was out there - behind my house, not in the front. The idiot wasn't even smart enough to pull a good ruse. Somewhere in his deluded mind, Bernard Witherspot thought he would lure me out of the front of my house while he snuck in the back and kidnapped my Mate.

"And that shit will not stand!" Tudful roared. *"We will burn him to the ground. We will feed what's left of his worthless body to the vermin. We will..."*

"How about we find him first, then I'll let you have your wicked way with him, Old Man?"

"Make it quick, Lad. I can't hold back much longer."

"Well, you better get your shit together, Old Man," Duncan's voice cut through our minds. *"You're not gonna like what you're about to see."*

Eyes flying towards the horizon, our combined gaze landed on the treetops where Bernard Fucking Witherspot – dressed as an old school Vampire, tux, cape, slicked back hair and all – was floating in midair with two of the craziest Witches the world had ever known on each side. I couldn't believe my eyes. How had the little shit found the only two people – make that shrew Witches – in all the world that I loathed more than stale ale or my nan's boiled spinach – Belladonna and Everalda Casterson.

Not only did they make my teenage years damned near unbearable with their unwanted advances and all too obvious attempts to make me drink love potions, but every Samhain Day celebration for seventy-five years, the sisters Casterson invaded my dreams. First, it started out with some harmless metaphysical flirting. Then, it progressed to supernatural stalking. Finally, I lost control and burned down my cottage on the edge of the Loch Coruisk.

Finally, in an act of desperation, I went to my Uncle Fergus, Head of the Council of Wyvern and Teaching Elder to all Wyvern Warriors. It took less than an hour before the twins were expelled, but not before they promised revenge on me and all my children.

So, how the hell had Bernard known, and how had he found them?

"Because he's a fucking Vampire with the blood of the First Vampire running through his veins," Tudful snarled. *"The wee shite must've scraped you during the battle in the Morgue and used that little speck of blood to find your greatest enemies."*

"And now we're here to slit your throat, drink your blood, and inhale the Power of the Wyvern," Belladonna and Everalda screeched with such a high-pitched fervor that a chill ran down my spine despite Tudful's scales. "No one makes the Casterson sisters look bad! We got expelled and then tossed out of our Coven. You will pay, Will Waterford."

Black Magic, strong, caustic, and smelling of rotten eggs, flew in every direction as Belladonna swooped to the left, Everalda flew to the right, and fucking Bernard Witherspot made a beeline for Betsey Sue. Running as fast as my feet and Tudful's Mysticism would carry me, I just barely had time to slide my massive arm under my Mate's feathered butt before the Newbie Vampire lunged at her.

Rolling into a ball, I held Betsey Sue close, letting whatever crap and crooked Sorcery those two batty shrews had given the wannabe Bloodsucker bounce off Tudful's scales. A scent like burning keratin and scorched enamel filled my senses. I had to get my Mate to safety so I could dispense with

the....

“You will do no such thing,” Betsey Sue growled from somewhere in the vicinity of my chest. “Let me hell outta here. I’ll whip up a Spell that Ajax won’t....”

Her words were cut off as an earth-shaking explosion sounded behind us. The air filled with glowing purple smoke and shining blue bubbles as sparkles in every color of the rainbow whipped on gusts of wind that reminded me of all the blizzards on the Isle of Skye.

Turning my head to the side to see what fresh hell had befallen us, I saw two women who had to be Witches flying toward Belladonna and Everalda with a look of unmitigated fury in their eyes. One looked like she’d stepped right out of the Hippodrome in London after one hell of a 1980s party.

Her blond hair was teased so high I thought a flock of seagulls might fly out of its curls at any moment, and her bright blue frosted eyeshadow could be seen for a country mile. I could see the neon green nail polish on her perfectly painted fingernails that matched the strip around the bottom of her bright orange and chartreuse mini dress.

The closer she got to the Casterson Sisters, the more I was sure she was going to put one of her five-inch, shocking pink platform sandals up each of their butts, but it was the petite redhead beside her that had my Mate whooping directly into my mind, “*Hell, yeah, that’s my girl, Zelda!*”

“Thank the Goddess, she’s on our side,” I huffed.

“*Hell, yeah,*” Betsey Sue continued to cheer as she squirmed out of my arms and got to her feet. “*She’s the next Witch in line to be the Baba Yaga and the Almighty Shifter Wanker.*”

“No, shit? You know the Shifter Wanker? I thought she was just a myth.”

“Damn straight, I know her, and Zelda’s no myth,” she proudly confirmed. “*And the other one is Carol, the for-real Baba Yaga.*”

“Damn, my love, you’ve got friends in high places.”

“You know it,” she said with a nod and a wink. “*And I’m gonna....*”

But that was as far as she got before Bernard Fucking Witherspot swooped out of the air and scooped up my Mate. Yelling and screaming and honking and squawking, Betsey Sue fought with her wings, beak, and those deadly claws at the tips of her webbed feet.

Taking off at a sprint, I called to Tudful, *"We need to get airborne. The son of a bitch is getting away."*

"Are you givin' me back control?"

"It's all yours, Old Man."

Sliding to the back of my consciousness, I let Tudful take the lead and prayed we were in time. From one step to the next, he pushed off with the back foot of our Warrior Wyvern and threw his arms over his head.

Launching himself into the air, I felt the Ancient Magic of the Wyvern working its way in, around, and through both the Wyvern King with whom I shared my soul and me. The tips of our wings that had curled inward to form the battleax-like appendages of the Warrior Wyvern ripped from the scales covering Tudful's back and extended to their full length and width.

His brawny arms were pulled into his chest and added to the raw power of the pectoral muscles that allowed his wings to thrust up and down with utter control. Unlike our Brethren, the Dragon, we Wyvern have no arms, but that didn't matter. Tudful's legs were extending, his massive feet were forming, and, thank the Great Goddess, his long, venomous talons were falling into place.

Streaking through the sky, I looked through his eyes and saw Bernard with a fighting, screaming, and biting Betsey Sue in his arms. Struggling to keep my Mate in his grasp, the Newbie Vamp swerved in the air and then dropped below the treetops before popping back into view.

Then I heard it, not only with Tudful's ears but in my mind. Betsey Sue was working on a Spell, and she was asking the Baba Yaga for help. *"Carol? Carol, it's Betsey Sue Bloomfield, and I need your help."*

"Well, you got it, Kiddo," the Baba Yaga replied with a raspy chuckle.

“Zelda and I just got these two halfwits locked in iron shackles. I’ve got a few minutes before I have to Magick their happy asses to Salem. Whatcha need?”

“I need to use the Whoopie Whammo, but I don’t want to mess it up.”

“Holy shit, Girlie, the Whoopie Whammo? Are you sure?”

I didn’t know what the Whoopie Whammo was, and I had never met the Baba Yaga, but tales of her great Magical prowess were known throughout the Paranormal Community. So, if she was shocked, I had to wonder if Betsey Sue knew what she was doing.

"Of course she does, Lad. That's our Mate up there."

No sooner had Tudful’s reassurance floated from his mind to mine than did the Baba Yaga declare, "You got this, Betsey Sue Bloomfield. Your momma didn't raise no slacker! I'll be right here if you need me, but somehow, I think this is just what you need to kick your Magical mojo into high gear."

“Okay,” my Mate answered, her voice shaky. “Just don’t leave till I get this goin’, yeah?”

“You know it.”

Now, I had no clue what the Whoopie Whammo was, and all I knew of Betsey Sue's Witchy Magic was that she had hidden it for most of her life and felt as though she would ever truly be able to use it properly. But I believed in her. I had never met a more passionate, intelligent, and wonderful person in my life. If anyone could work the Whoopie Whammo Spell, it was my Mate, and I was going to tell her so.

“You go this, *fy nghariad*,” I reassured. “And Tudful and I are right behind you. Go for it!”

"I love you, Will."

“I love you, Betsey Sue, with all my heart.”

“And I love y’all too, but I’m gettin' old, and I need to get these two chuckleheads to the Witch Jail before sundown," the Baba Yaga chuckled.

"So, get to Spelling, Betsey Sue. Make that Vamp pay for rufflin' your feathers."

The silence seemed to stretch out for hours when it was really only a few seconds. Finally, my sweet little Witchy Black Swan started. *"For you, it's out of the ashes and into the fire, Bernard Witherspot, you're big stupid Vampire. You're crazier than a bag of cats, and your belfry is definitely full of bats. I didn't want to do this, but you've left me no choice. It's the Whoopie Whammy, the Spell everyone avoids. As soon as I snap my fingers, your back will go straight. Then your mouth will snap shut, and you'll be in quite a state. But the best comes when I snap again because that's the beginning of the real pain. So, if you want to stop the madness and turn yourself in, just say the word before I bop you on the chin."*

As I heard the last word in Betsey Sue's sweet voice, it was as if the skies had opened wide. Red bubbles filled the air. A cloud of blue and purple smoke whirled and swirled as if it was pirouetting to a tune I couldn't hear. Explosions, like fireworks, were everywhere, spewing orange and yellow sparkles in every direction.

And Bernard, well, the little asshole, was doing a nosedive toward the Tallulu Parish public pool almost faster than my eyes could track. Looking up and down, then left and right, I spotted Betsey Sue in the distance, her wings gently flapping and a smile on her cute little beak that made my heart sing.

"You did great, my love. I have no idea what you did, but it was great."

"I turned him into a Vampire shaped board. He can't move, talk, or even scream for help."

"That is brilliant. Now, get on over here, and let's go home."

"Hold it right there, Loverboy," the Baba Yaga cut in. *"I need to gather up that murderous Newbie Vamp and debrief our little Betsey Sue. This is her first major use of Magic, and there are forms to fill out."*

"As you wish, after all, you are the Baba Yaga," I responded.

"And while I'm gone, you'll have time to put the house back together," my

Mate chuckled as I watched her fly towards Carol and the redheaded Witch named Zelda.



With Tudful's Magic, a little of my own, Duncan's, and Betsey Sue's Flock and their Mates, it took precisely twenty-four hours to get my house back in shape and ready for my Mate. As those of us who remained sat around on the deck, I asked a question that Betsey Sue had asked me. "Hey, Cora, where were you during all the fighting?"

"I was in New York finishing a deal with an up-and-coming artist."

"I thought you were retired," Clem teased as she leaned into the arms of her Mate, Tank, a T-Rex Shifter. "At least, that's what you said when you knocked Duncan outta the sky and trapped him in your root cellar."

"Will you ever give it a rest, Clementine C. Cooper?" Cora laughed out loud and kissed her Mate, my best friend, the Dragon, on the cheek. "All is well that ends well, isn't that the saying?"

"It damned sure is," Betsey Sue hollered as she rounded the corner of the house and headed straight for me.

I didn't care who was there and who saw. I was so happy to have my little Witchy Black Swan home, so I did the only thing I could. I jumped off the deck, crossed the yard in four strides, and scooped her up in my arms.

Laying my lips to hers, I kissed my Mate with everything I had and then some. As she opened to me – body, mind, and soul – all our friends laughed aloud, and then Cora chuckled, "And that's our cue to leave, people. I happen to know how these welcome home kisses end, and there's no way in hell and hootenannies I wanna see that." Clearing her throat, I imagined her looking over the rims of her cat eyeglasses as she added, "But I expect a full report of what happened to that crazy Vamp and those two weirdo Witches when y'all finally come up for air."

Reluctantly lifting my lips from Betsey Sue's as quickly as possible, I smiled at that lovely Crane, winked at Duncan, and mouthed, "Thank you."

Not waiting until our friends had dispersed, I slid my hands down to Betsey Sue's butt, lifted my Mate off the ground, and as she wrapped her legs around my waist, I sprinted for the house. Up the stairs and into *our* bedroom, gently laid Betsey in the middle of the biggest damned bed Tudful's Magic could conjure and slid up by her side. I just couldn't stop looking at her or smiling. She was the best thing I'd ever seen, and I wanted her to know.

Opening my mind completely to her, I kept nothing back. She saw the good, the bad, and all the lovey-dovey feel-goods (Those are Betsey Sue's words. I'm just trying them on for size.), and I was happier than I'd ever been. So, when she looked at me like I was the best thing she'd ever seen, and her thoughts confirmed it, I could've flown without Tudful's wings. Betsey Sue Bloomfield Soon-to-be-Waterford, the sexiest, most beautiful, absolutely fantastic woman to ever call Tallulu Parish, Louisiana home, loved me with all her heart and then some.

Placing my hands on either side of her face, I laid my lips lightly on one of her closed eyelids and then the other. I kissed the apples of her cheeks and the tip of her nose. Each kiss was little more than a touch of my lips to her skin, but the fact that my little Witchy Black Swan let me love her my way meant the world to me. I wanted my actions to show that I would always take care of her, always be there for her, and always and forever love her with every little piece of myself. I wanted her to know that my world revolved around her, and that would never change.

I was in Heaven. Betsey Sue was the center of my universe, and I planned to love her all night long and then some.

Laying kisses on one corner and then the other of her mouth, I caught her sigh of satisfaction before lightly nipping at her bottom lip. Our hearts skipped a beat in unison. Being with the one the Universe made for me was so much better than anything I'd ever experienced.

Giving her tiny love bites and tasting her jaw made goosebumps dance all over her body. And when I sucked her earlobe between my teeth and bit down lightly, she almost came from the sheer pleasure of it all. Pulling away just long enough to remove her T-shirt and mine, I came right back, picking up where I'd left off. Arching her back, Betsey Sue pushed her lace-covered hardened nipples into my bare chest and ground her hips against mine. I could see in her mind and feel in her heart that she was searching for relief from the wildfire we were stoking together.

Tormenting the sweet spot behind her ear with my teeth and tongue, I reached between our bodies and slowly unclasped my bra before my little Witchy Black Swan knew what was happening. There were no objections, only moans telling me she was in it with me all the way.

Spurred on by the fire burning within my Mate, my hands moved frantically over her body. My heart continued to race in sync with hers. I had to have more. Throwing her bra on the floor, I damn near ripped the yoga pants from her body as the primal need of True Fated Mates grew between us.

The need to feel every inch of one another's naked flesh became an undeniable demand of not only our bodies but our souls. We had to be one. Had to be together, body, mind, and soul. The bond had to be complete, and it had to be that very minute.

My teeth grazed her collarbone, and she whimpered. I sucked her nipple into my mouth and felt all thought fly from her mind. All we could do was feel. Nothing in my life could compare to the feeling of being with the woman the Universe and the Goddess of All made just for me.

It was bliss. I was happier than I'd ever imagined possible. I knew what she needed, what I wanted, what Betsey Sue's heart desired even before she did.

Releasing her breast with a pop, my lips immediately went to the other, giving it the same fierce attention. Betsey Sue was lost to the love, lust, and

everything we were together. It was just as all the stories from Elders had promised – it was perfect.

Rolling her hips, she tried with all her might to ride my very hard cock, but I still had my jeans on, and she was denied, but that didn't stop her from trying. Every rotation, every swivel made my cock bump her excited clit, and bursts of light like gorgeous fireworks flashed through our joined mind's eye. It was awesome, but not near enough. I needed to feel *all of her*. I. Needed. My. Witchy. Black. Swan more than I'd ever needed anything in my entire life.

Then, my sassy Mate tried to drive me absolutely insane in all the right ways.

Sliding her hand inside my pants, she ran her fingertips over the throbbing head of my erection. She gasped when I gasped, and our shivers only made everything so much better. Wrapping her hand around my cock, she rubbed her thumb across the tip, spreading the drop of moisture, the proof of my excitement all around. Once again shuddering and shaking, I slowly pumped my hips and sighed, "Oh, *fy nghariad*. My Betsey Sue, I love you so much," as my dick rubbed across her palm.

It was as if the strength in my body had doubled, no, tripled. My power, my Magic, *all that I was* grew by leaps and bounds now that I was with my Mate. Rolling us over, I planted my hands on either side of her head, held all of my weight off of her petite frame, and continued to rub my hips against hers. The denim of my jeans slid between us as I used the motion to remove them. The breath froze in my lungs from the electrical current that shot through my body at our skin-to-skin contact.

I threw my head back in pleasure, and my lusty little Witchy Black Swan cooed, "I just wanna lick every ridge and valley of the spectacularly corded muscles in your neck. I love you more than coffee, chocolate, and sunny summer days. You, Will Waterford, are all mine, and damn it all, I am one happy Witchy Black Swan."

I couldn't speak, could only move. Pushing against my Mate with a groan that came from somewhere deep inside my soul, I forced myself to stop. Then, I waited for a single beat of our hearts. My head fell forward, and wholly and instantly, I was lost in Betsey Sue's mesmerizing gaze. There was nowhere else I wanted to be...ever.

Time stood still. I had no clue how much time had passed, but when I slowly lowered my body until I was braced on my forearms with only a few inches separating our lips, my cock slid from her hand. In one fluid move, I slowly slipped inside her warm, wet pussy. Inch by spectacular inch, we became joined... one to the other. Betsey Sue's inner muscles contracted, pulling me farther into her. Sweat gathered on my upper lip as I fought to go slowly.

"I love you all the more for trying to be careful with me," Betsey Sue panted. "But I am so close. I need you more than I need to breathe."

"As-As you wish, *fy nghariad*," I breathed.

Pushing that last inch, I was seated entirely within her and could finally breathe. It was perfect - one moment of utter bliss to be remembered for all time. Our souls became one. There would never be a time I would be without my Witchy Black Swan, my Mate, the most wonderful woman in all the world. I was whole for the first time in my entire life.

Her eyes slid shut, but I needed to see her - I had to look into her eyes. "Look at me, Betsey Sue," I panted. "Look at the man who's loved you from the moment he laid eyes on you and will love for all time and then some."

Her eyes flew open, and I watched her every emotion swim in the brilliant depths of her beautiful blue eyes as she showed me how much she truly loved me. Wrapping her legs around my waist, my Mate met me stroke for stroke as my casual in-and-out thrusts began.

From one breath to the next, our pace accelerated. Driving in and out of Betsey Sue, I pushed us both to the release we so desperately sought. The muscles in my butt flexed under her calves as I worked deeper and harder

into her body.

Sliding my knees up, lifting her butt from the bed, the change in position pushed my pelvis into her clit and caused my cock to rub the sensitive bundle of nerves at the top of her channel with every stroke. Thought became impossible. Betsey Sue's orgasm was building, careening through her body like a runaway train, bigger than anything I could have ever imagined, and the whole time I was held captive by her gaze.

"Come with me, Betsey Sue," I panted.

My Mate owned all that I was, and it completely undid me. I had no idea where I ended, and she began. It was nothing short of amazing.

"Trust me, Betsey Sue. I've got you, and I'm never letting go."

No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I thrust so hard we were well and truly one for all time. The exquisite sensation undid the last of my sweet Mate's resolve. There was no denying Fate. Betsey Sue did as I asked... she let go and trusted. Nothing had been sweeter in all my five-hundred-and-seventy-five years.

Coming together with such force our bodies shook, our hearts skipped a beat, and lights flashed like fireworks in the darkness. I'm pretty sure Betsey Sue lost consciousness for a second or two, and that was just fine with me. It allowed me to bring her floating back to reality with butterfly kisses on her face and neck.

Rolling to the side, I took Betsey Sue with me. Stopping only when she was sprawled across my body, boneless and spent, with peace flowing through her. I reveled in another unforgettable moment.

Of course, my Witchy Black Swan was not finished with me yet. Turning her head, she looked up at me and squinted when she found me looking back at her. A lump rose in my throat. There was so much love in her gaze. All I could do was thank the Great Goddess for my Mate. Swallowing a couple of times before I could speak, my voice still sounded rough and gravelly as I whispered, "I love you, Betsey Sue Bloomfield Soon-to-be-Waterford. I'll

love you from here to the hereafter and five miles past that.”

Grinning like only a well-loved woman can, my Mate winked before snuggling us under the blankets and vowing, “We aren’t ever leaving this bed.”

To which I replied, "You got it, my love. I would move Heaven and Earth to make you happy."

“You are better than a venti frou-frou, highly caffeinated coffee with enough white chocolate syrup to give a human a toothache and a pile of whipped cream swirled on top." Then, with a wink, she added, "Which I will need pretty soon just to keep my strength up."

Laughing out loud, I kissed the tip of her nose, returned the wink, and reassured her, "I got you covered. You know the 911 Dispatcher who's friends with Cora?"

"Of course I do. Willow's the one who got y'all there, saved my girls' house, made it possible for me to meet you, and was instantly made a member of the Maidens of Mayhem."

"Yep, that's her. Well, she just opened Willow's White Wing Deliveries. So, I set up a standing order for one of your 'special drinks' to be delivered every morning and afternoon."

“Oh, my Great Goddess in lime green go-go boots,” she squealed. Jumping up and throwing her arms around me, Betsey Sue peppered my face with quick little kisses as she sang, “I... kiss... love... kiss... you... kiss... Will... Waterford... kiss-kiss-kiss.”

Putting my arms around her, I slid farther under the covers and pulled her over me. "And I love you, Betsey Sue Bloomfield Soon-to-be-Waterford, and I'm going to show you just how much."

“Oh, my Heavens,” she pretended to swoon. “My Wyvern’s Gonna Roar, and that's just the way I like him."

Keep reading...

My little Witchy Black Swan has some news for you.

~Will

EPILOGUE

HAPPILY EVER AFTER FLOCK MIDLIFE MAIDEN OF MAYHEM STYLE



Okay, so here's the wrap-up. I'm pretty sure you thought I was gonna forget all about you and leave you hangin' since I was with my hunka-hunka-Wyvern-hotness. No way would I do that. You and I, we've been through too much together, and my momma taught me better.

So here goes...

After loving Will Waterford, my wonderful Wyvern Mate, until neither of us could move....

Oh!! That's not what you wanted to know? HA! I know. I know. I was just messin' with ya'!

So, here it is. As far as Bernard goes, Carol – the Baba Yaga - and Zelda – the Almighty Shifter Wanker and the next in line to be the Baba Yaga - called in the Vampire Council, and they hauled his happy little ass all the way back to Sighișoara, Romania. It seems the real Vamps are doing everything in their power to perpetuate the rumors that Vlad the Impaler was the first Vampire.

As I'm sure you've figured out, he was not. His first victim, whose name is unknown or kept from the rest of the world, which I suspect is the case, was an actual Vampire - the first of their kind. I mean, it only makes sense since it was the concoction Bernard made with that poor dead man's sternum that turned the asshat into a Vampire, right?

Well, I guess dear old Butthead Bernard posted all over social media – even put a video on GhoulTube – that he had become a Vampire with some super secret potion he made himself. The idiot planned on selling it on Ghoulify. What a boob!

Apparently, the Vampire Council was so happy when Carol called that they almost – yes, just almost – smiled. So, they have the idiot locked in a cell in the deepest, darkest dungeon of Vlad the Impaler's castle and are selling tickets for all the other Vamps to come pelt him with rotten tomatoes.

As you can imagine, I think it's fabulous. Oh! I almost forgot: the Head Vamp also invited Will and me to come and join in the festivities for free! My hunka-hunka-hot-Wyvern isn't sure he can be trusted within a hundred miles of the dude who almost killed me, but I'm workin' on him. I think it would be a blast.

As for Belladonna and Everalda Casterson - they are safely tucked away in Witch Jail in Salem, Massachusetts. As Zelda explained, it's where she spent some time back in her misspent youth. She said it is a 1900s hotel converted into a prison about the same time it was built.

I was worried those two shrews might be able to get out, but Carol stepped in and said it was virtually impossible. You see, it is heavily warded with SUPER DUPER Magic that keeps all Mortals and responsible Magic-Makers away. As a second protection, the outside is glamoured to look like a bed and breakfast - with climbing ivy, flowers, and all.

Of course, I was like, "What. The. Hell? It's pretty?"

But once again, I was reassured by Zelda, who explained, "Oh, Girl, that's just the outside. The inside is cold and ugly, with barren brick walls covered in slime, and Cell Block D is designated for witches who abused their Magic. Best of all, it is staffed by older-than-dirt witches and warlocks with a mean streak a mile wide. Trust me. I know."

So, I felt better. Those two troublemakers who thought they could steal my man just to torture him will never get out of jail, and that makes me a

very happy Witchy Black Swan.

Carol also told me how proud of me she was and said that she called my mom to tell her. I felt bad. I bet Mom wondered why I didn't call, but maybe she understands. After all, I am newly Mated, if you know what I mean. But just in case she's upset, Will and I have planned to take a trip to the Big Apple to see her in the near future. He also has promised to take me to Wales and Isle of Skye. I just can't wait.

Let's see... Is there anything else?

Oh yeah, Bobby showed up at the Morgue to find one hell of a mess. Thankfully, Will, Duncan, J.B., and all the rest of my Flock and their Mates arrived about a minute later. As one big happy family, they fixed everything new and even upgraded our DNA sequencer and Mass Spectrometer.

Any other time, I would've been worried about them using so much Magic because there is always a cost, but it was all cleared with Carol and the Shifter Special Branch of Magical Usage. Will even got a certificate of completion that now hangs in my office.

So, I think that catches you up. I sure hope you enjoyed our story and being there when I finally got to be with the man made for me by the Universe. I'm off to finish my venti frou-frou, highly caffeinated coffee with enough white chocolate syrup to give a human a toothache and a pile of whipped cream swirled on top that my honey-bunches-of-love had delivered this morning. And I can't forget a shout-out to Willow Whitefeather for delivering it before the whipped cream started to melt. That girl is a gem, I tell ya'.

Be good, and don't do anything I wouldn't do – which, you know, leaves the door wide open....

Until next time...

Always follow your heart, watch out for falling bodies, and dare to dream.

Trust me, good things are comin' your way.

XOXO, Betsey Sue

BLAST OFF WITH MMU!



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go to <https://magicandmayhemuniverse.com/>

And if you would like to read the book that started all the madness, Switching
Hour is FREE!

<https://robyneterman.com/switching-hour/>

CHECK IT OUT!



The First Story I Wrote in the Magic & Mayhem Universe: HEIDI: A 'Not-Quite' Hellhound Love Story

Okay, I know what you're thinking. You have the insane notion that with a name like Heidi I have long blonde braids, wear wooden shoes and yodel every time I want hot chocolate. You couldn't be more wrong or any closer to getting slapped.

First of all, I'm a hellhound (well, sort of) with long hair so black it shines. Yes, even in the pits of Hell, as I'm sure you've guessed the ghouls down here like to tease me all the time, so don't... Just. Don't. It will lead to blood shed...yours. My wardrobe consists of black leather and only black leather - in every shape, form and piece of clothing I can beg, borrow, or steal. Which you would think would be uncomfortable with all the fire and brimstone in the Underworld but it really didn't bother me until I left my cozy little dungeon in Hotel Hell and headed topside for West Virginia.

It's hotter than a witch's tit in a cast iron bra up there, something I had somehow forgotten since my untimely demise and descent. Eventually, I learned to deal with the heat, what choice did I have. However, the closer I got to God's country, (Do not tell Lucifer I said that.) it wasn't the heat that

sucked but the front desk clerks at the local No-Tell Motels. Has no one told them about Clearasil or a comb? How about shampoo and deodorant? I'm thinking the people at Johnson & Johnson or the ones who make Axe spray could seriously cash in up here. Needless to say, the 'boys' look at me like I've got three heads and might bite, which...naw, just kidding.

Lastly, and this is the most important thing to remember. I will stab anyone, yes, I seriously mean anyone who yodels after I introduce myself, starts to clog dance or dares to pick up a banjo. I can take anything but a banjo...*shiver*.

Now, that we've gotten all that straight, I have a helluva story to tell you. One that will make you shake your head and be thankful it happened to me not you. So, sit back, relax, grab a cold one of your choice and get ready... this one's gonna rock your world!

It all started a couple of years ago. I was a lawyer and a damn good one, too. Which means I was a no-good, good-for-nothing, conniving shark who didn't give a shit about anything or anyone. The only things important to me were that my win column quadrupled my loss in the courtroom and that I owned the newest Christian Louboutin's before anyone else, the rest of the world be damned.

I guess I should've seen it coming, I mean my mother did make my twenty-ninth birthday a real special event by showing up after five years of silence and announcing she was a servant of the Dark Lord and had bartered my soul for her power. Now, tell me that's not motherly love.

As luck would have it, I never made it to my thirtieth birthday thanks to an inept barista, a hole in the sidewalk and the number ten bus. Let me explain. On my way to court, I stopped at my favorite coffee joint, to get my usual - a quad shot, NO foam, caramel macchiato. Looking at my watch as the new girl behind the counter took longer to brew coffee than it took God to create the world, I realized if I didn't walk out the door in exactly two minutes and seventeen seconds I would be late for court. So, using my charm,

or as most would call it, my snark, I asked, “Must you pick and roast the beans for every cup?”

Obviously, I rattled the poor thing, because she shook like a leaf on a tree during the next two minutes and eighteen seconds before putting my java in my hand and whispering, “Enjoy your day.”

I exited the building at a high rate of speed, thinking of all the excuses I could give the cranky judge for being late. It had to be good, damn good, to avoid a fine for delaying the proceedings. You see, I was what they called habitually late, to the point that most judges and their clerks would point out, “We will be operating on regular time today, not Heidi time, so adjust your watch accordingly Ms. Burns,” so you see, I had to be creative or pay a buttload of fines to avoid a night in jail for contempt.

I slammed my hand against the crosswalk button and at the first flash of the green light stepped forward. Unfortunately, the heel of my four-inch, flaming red Jimmy Choo’s landed squarely in a hole in the asphalt at the same time the dreaded foam I had ‘politely’ requested be absent from my drink went straight up my nose. Coughing and sputtering with tears running down my face, I ended up pulling my foot out of the shoe instead of my shoe out of the hole. Not willing to lose the heels I’d paid double for to have before anyone else on the planet, I bent down to retrieve said footwear at the precise moment the number ten bus that was headed for Fifteenth and Main turned the corner. Bingo-bango squished Heidi, Jimmy Choo’s and all.

The next few days were a blur while I hovered around. I’m ashamed to admit that watching random crime scene techs scrape me off the pavement and the grill of the bus was the highlight. The funniest part was witnessing my mother weeping at the morgue while identifying pieces of me. She gave an Academy award winning performance the likes of Meryl Streep and the Dame Judi Dench herself. And...of course, she left out the part about selling my soul to the Devil.

My funeral was extravagant and as you might’ve guessed, all centered

around mom. She even had the audacity to have pink (her favorite color. Weird for a witch who practices the dark arts, am I right?) roses on the altar next to my urn, (Yeah, the bimbo had me cremated. Can you believe that crap?) knowing full well that pink makes me gag.

After that debacle I kind of floated around, watching the world and wondering what was to come. Sooner, rather than later, I was whisked on a southbound journey that ended at the Gates of Hell and a welcome kick in the butt from Cerberus, the three-headed hellhound guard dog of Hades who was to be my boss, for lack of a better term.

It seems that since my mortal soul was used by my mother to inherit the dark magic of only the Devil himself knows who, that I was now the property of Hell – lock, stock and all my fabulous shoes. I know what you're thinking. You figure that since I was an attorney, also known as a sleaze bag to most while living, that I was headed here anyway. And...maybe you're right but I would've at least liked to have made my own way...ya' know what I mean? Oh well, que sera sera as Doris Day would say. The past is the past...or is it?

As you might have guessed, there's more. Whoever the dimwit was that my mother used to liberate her magical abilities from some poor hapless schmuck was apparently not the brightest candle on the mantel and instead of my mom bearing the brunt of his or her lack of ability, (OR stupidity, you take your pick.) it was passed on to me. Confused yet? Yeah, I was too.

Picture this...I show up dressed in black leather, my fabric of choice as you'll remember from a few minutes ago, from head to toe, wearing an absolutely fabulous pair of Giselle Cuissard four-inch stiletto boots with a pointed toe, suede covered heel and gold tone aglets that, by the way, came all the way up to the top of my thigh – zipper and all, (Had I not been in Hell I would've been on Cloud 9 – my boots were to die for. Get it? To die for?) to be greeted by the biggest, fiercest, three-headed dog in the Universe. (No, not the ONLY three-headed dog in the Universe, there are more – so beware, just the biggest, but I digress.) I am escorted (read that as manhandled) by his

minions, who showed me to the dungeon I would be in charge of and after several hours of trying not to smell the stench of rotting flesh and fetid blood still dripping onto the stone floor from every imaginable torture device, I finally meet my trainer, Luci, Crown Princess of Hell and Lucifer's daughter. (Yes, you read that right. The big bad evil has a little girl.)

To say I was shocked from first glance would be an understatement. Luci was almost six-foot tall with a curvy build (not as curvy as me, but curves nonetheless) flaming red curls piled as high as they would go on the top of her head with some ringlets framing her face in a Devil-may-care way. (Get it? Devil? And her dad is...You better step up, I got a million of these.) She was smiling from ear-to-ear and her green eyes glittered like meeting me was the greatest thing ever, which should've made me feel welcome but it was her dress that made me realize I truly was in Hell.

It was a pink *shudder*...no, that's not quite accurate. It was a hot pink *double shudder* sheath dress to which she had added a huge (think softball sized) white and yellow diamond encrusted daisy brooch on the right side of her ample bosom. And...she had the matching ring which I saw when she held out her hand for me to shake and in a high cheery voice with a southern accent said, "You must be Heidi. I'm Luci and I am just as pleased as punch to meet you."

Not wanting to offend the Devil's daughter, I shook her hand, smiled and responded with, "I am honored to be trained by the Princess of Hell."

Shrugging with a chuckle and a wave of her hand, Luci giggled (Yes, it was a giggle *shudder again*), "It is my pleasure. Daddy is always telling me I need to stay in the castle and learn about running 'his dominion' but to be honest," she stepped closer and lowered her voice to a whisper, "I'm really not very good at all the diplomatic, political stuff." Smiling again, she laughed, "I'm more of a torture and maim kinda girl. I like being in trenches, getting my hands dirty."

Not sure what to say, I simply nodded and smiled while thinking, oh my

God, what fresh piece of good old fashion shit has my mother gotten me into this time? Thankfully, Luci either didn't pick up on my lack of an answer or took my nod as a sign that I agreed because she didn't miss a beat before rattling on. "So, Heidi, I was thinkin' about takin' you around to meet all the other hounds and ghouls but first I want you to meet Hunter." I turned around to give my patented 'whatever' smile and tough girl handshake to what I was sure was going to be an emaciated skeletal figure who had to stand twice to make a shadow, only to find seven-foot-nothing of muscled gorgeousness, with thick wavy hair that hung down to his waist, electric blue eyes that looked right into my soul, and a low smooth baritone voice with a British accent that curled my toes when he said, "Nice to meet you, Heidi."

Still speechless when his massive hand closed around mine, I could only gasp as an electric current that could've kept the Vegas strip lit for a year ran up my arm, down my spine and landed squarely in what my sorority sisters used to call 'my whoopee pie'. Stammering, while furiously attempting not to look like a total idiot, I finally breathed, "Nice to meet you, Hunter," at the same time the evil little slut, Lola - also known as my alter ego - reared her perfectly painted red lips and said, "Who gives a crap what his name is? We're just gonna be hollering 'Oh God' and 'Yes' all night long!"

Shaking my head, trying to ignore Lola, I had to smile when Hunter's pupils dilated, his nostrils flared and he unconsciously licked his lips. Of course, my victory was short lived when Luci stepped up beside Mr. Hunky Hellhound, wrapped her daisy-ringed hand around his bulging bicep and chirped, "Isn't he just the sweetest thang?" Kissing his cheek, she added, "We're gettin' married in three weeks." Then jumping up and down on her pink kitten heel slingbacks, she squealed, "Ohhhhhhhh! Heidi, honey, would you be my maid-of-honor?"

Letting go of her fiancée, *groan*, Luci grabbed my hand while still bouncing like lotto balls on Saturday night and pleaded, "please, please pppllleeeaaasssee say yes."

So when the Devil's only daughter, the crown princess of Hell, the apple of daddy's eye asks the new girl to be her maid of honor what does the new girl do? Well, duh, she says, "Oh yes, Luci, I would be honored." While internally groaning and wondering if there are convents in Hell because now that I'd laid eyes on Hunter there would never, ever, ever be another man for me.

"Yay!" Luci shrieked, so loud it rebounded around my dungeon so many times it sounded like there was a chorus of Luci's instead of (thank you, God) only one.

Pulling on my hand, the one she was still holding with the strength of Atlas, Hell's Princess led me out of my very own dungeon (which I had decided wasn't so bad after meeting Luci) chirping, "Byeeeeee," over her shoulder to her fiancée *groan* while I tried to avoid eye contact with Hunter, soon to be the Hunted...by me, at all costs. (See, even in the face of despair, I still got it.)

The dark, dank corridor, lit by burning torches in iron sconces on the walls for light, was creepy and had it not been for Luci chattering nonstop about her wedding plans I might've been scared. Thankfully, we started to run into the other torturers, (Is that a word? Well, it is now.) at which time the Princess had to stop talking about her upcoming nuptials to the man of my dreams and introduce me to my fellow Hellians. (That is what I call the inhabitants of Hell. Got a better name? I thought not.)

Hours later we arrived back at the entrance to my dungeon just as an imp, who couldn't have been any taller than four-foot-three, came clomping around the corner pulling a little red wagon - no, really it was a little red wagon - full of buckets of chow for the hounds who did not possess the ability to shift forms. (I later found out these were the sons of Cerberus and so was Hunter which made no sense at the time, but more about that later.)

I would've laughed at the imp's floppy pointed ears, beady black eyes, bumpy swollen lips and olive green skin had he not smiled a shy little smile

that showed just the tips of his two little fangs the second he laid eyes on Luci. The electricity between those two was well...electric. Not like what I'd experienced when Hunter touched me but still good enough to light the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Centre for a week.

Several long seconds passed while Luci twirled one of her wayward ringlets around her finger and batted her eyes as the imp straightened the black leather belt around his dark brown animal skin frock and continued to smile. Finally, when I thought I might barf on my boots, I cleared my throat, stuck out my hand and said, Hi, I'm Heidi, the newest Hellhound."

Jumping like I'd struck him, the imp's eyes flew to me, he took a deep breath, straightened his belt one more time and said, "Oh, Heidi. I heard there was a new hound on the way. I'm Bert..."

His words trailed off as once again he looked at Luci, who was now suspiciously staring at the ground and frantically shaking her head with as little motion as possible, hoping, I guess, I wouldn't see her thirteen-inch Aqua netted updo bobbing like it was about to fall over. Looking back and forth between the two it was obvious what was going on and even more obvious that it was supposed to be a secret.

Winking at my new best friend, it was my turn to grab her hand and pull her close. Leaning towards her, I smiled and whispered, "Your secret is safe with me. After all, what are besties for?"

Squealing with delight, Luci hugged me until I wondered if I could die twice but this time from asphyxia before pulling back and nodding, "Oh, I just knew it the minute I saw you. I knew we'd be close as sisters. Thank you, Heidi, thank you so much."

"You're very welcome, Luci," I smiled, all the while thinking, where is Hunter and how can I break up the wedding of the Princess of Hell without ending up as a chew toy for my new boss?

(Yeah, eternity in Hell is gonna be...well, Hell...)

READ THE WHOLE STORY RIGHT HERE!

LOOKIE! LOOKIE!



A Sneak Peek of Cora's Story: THAT DRAGON GONNA BLOW!

"You're gonna wear a path in those brand-new, too-expensive-to-think-about solid hardwood floors you just had to have because you seem to have forgotten that we are NOT in New York anymore. I mean, come on. We are in the backass of Nowhere. Do you really think anyone here gives a good gosh damn what the floors are made of?"

"Well, I..."

"No. No, they do not. And to put a finer point on it, no matter where we have lived, we never – and I mean NEVER EVER – needed to impress anyone anyway. You just got too puffed up for your feathers somewhere along the way. Once you officially put esquire after your name, your head got bigger than a float at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade."

"Well, now, that's just not...."

"Yes, it is right. And furthermore, who gives a good steaming, stinky cow patty what floors look like if you're just gonna cover them up with rugs like you do? You need to chill out and sit your booty down. She'll get here when she gets here."

"Is it my turn to speak yet?"

"Yeah, I guess it is."

"First of all, I am most certainly not going to wear a path on my gorgeous new floors. Secondly, and in no specific order, there is only one rug in the middle of that room, Dork. It's called interior design. Read a book. Besides, these floors are guaranteed for three hundred years, and on top of that, I added some Magical protection of my very own," I grumbled through gritted teeth.

"Oh, that oughta be good. You work Magic like a sumo wrestler puts in Spanx – just wrong on every level."

"Not hearing you."

"Oh, you hear me, alright. You hear me loud and clear, Ms. Coraline C. Crankenbush. I am in your brain, your soul, your every-damn-thing. You can't ignore me. You know you can't. So, just listen up and listen good."

Doing exactly what she said I couldn't, I ignored the Crane with whom I shared my soul in grand fashion – which, as you can imagine, was the only way I did anything. Then I went right back to my original argument with even more verve, gusto, and the good bit of sass I possessed because well, Camila just plain pissed me off. *"And, before you get your plumage in a twist, I take great offense to you saying my feathers are..."*

"Puffed up."

"Whatever! I am and will always be the most sought-after editor and agent in the biz. I'll have you know that I earned that esquire after my name. Therefore, I have an image to uphold. I entertain clients and movers and shakers in my home. I..."

"You don't entertain anyone out here on the other side of The Swamp in Tallulu Parish, Louisiana, my dear. Ain't nobody in Gucci loafers trekking their bejeweled asses all the way down here. They might get pig shit on their Burberry socks or chicken feed in the cuffs of their Armani pants. And you can take that to the bank, my dear."

“Shut up and listen,” I seethed. “You only interrupt when you know I’m winning the argument.”

“Well, I never.”

“Oh, hell yes, you did, you do, and you will again.” I cleared my throat because I knew how very much it pissed her off when I paused in any fashion for dramatic effect, then I kept right on going. “I know precisely where we are. I’m the one who made the decision to relocate. I’m the one who made all the plans. Hell, I’m the one who moved us.”

“Nope, you’re the one who barely lifted a finger except to dial your cellphone. Girl, you barely even hired the movers. That was all that sweet little Madagascar Pochard Shifter assistant of yours. She is so sweet, and that accent – oh, Girl, isn’t just adorable. Besides the fact that her kind is very endangered,” the Crane with whom I shared my soul, Camila, sassed right back like we were having tea, not freaking out. “And no, I do not think you know where we are at all. This ain’t summer camp, we in the South – the Deep South, but that’s beside the point. Women down here take good care of their homes. They just have the good sense not to spend a frikkin’ fortune on wooden floors. Nor do they tear from window to window, throwing back the curtains they paid way too much for. And you need to stop staring at that long ass lane you have yet to walk down on your own two feet because you might stub your toe or mess up the heel of your shoe. It isn’t gonna make her get here any sooner.”

“I know that. I’m just...”

“You’re just freaking the hell out,” that blasted Crane cackled like the crazy bird she was. “And that is not something you’re not used to doing. You like to be the one throwing the shit, not catchin’ it. If you hadn’t...”

“Stop right there,” I snarled.

Shoving my black cat eye spectacles bejeweled with pink Swarovski crystals atop my head, I came to a screeching halt that had my fuchsia kitten heels sliding on the oriental rug – yes, the one Camila had just made fun of -

that I'd picked up on Canal Street for a song right before relocating to the armpit of the South. Fists slamming onto my hips, I added with a mental and audible growl loud enough for all of The Swamp to hear – not to mention rattling my brain, "It was *your* fault I messed up. If you hadn't been....!"

"If I hadn't been what?" Camila shrieked. *"If I hadn't been trying to keep your three-days-older-than-dirt butt from sliding down the mud pile you call a backyard? Or maybe you were gonna say if I hadn't been keeping you upright on those damned heels you insist on wearing even though we left New York City almost a year ago and are now smack ass in the middle of a place not-so-lovingly known as The Swamp where you should be wearing boots?"*

"You've said that a hundred times in this conversation alone. Put another quarter in the jukebox and pick a new tune. That one...."

It's the only tune I know these days 'cause it rings so true. And while I'm at it...."

"Aren't you always at it?"

Why, yes, yes, I am, and I'm always right. Just like when I was trying to warn you that the Spell you were trying to work was gonna backfire - like it did. Am I right? Why, of course, I'm right. Now, where was I? Oh, yeah, or...."

"Shut. Up. Camila."

"I most certainly will not. I'm winning this argument. There's no way in Hell I'm backing down now. You never let me win – even when I'm right. You always have to get the last word in, no matter what. But this time – this time, I'm right, and I'm gonna harp on that point until the cows come home."

There was a slight pause during which I tried to get a word in edgewise. However, as usual, that cranky, crazed Crane was two steps ahead of me, and her beak was flapping before I got so far as to take a breath.

"The cows do come home down here in Loueeeeesiana, don't they? That's what Bobbi Sue, Billy Jo, and all the other people with two names and those sweet, southern accents say, isn't it?"

"Yes, but..."

"Well, then buckle up, Buttercup, 'cause I'm ridin' this train to the end. Now, back to what I was saying..."

"No, please," I gasped, realizing at that moment that I was again speaking aloud even though I shared a brain with the most obstinate, whacko of a Crane the Great Goddess ever forced into the soul of a woman like me.

"Oh, hush, Coraline, you..."

"Do not call me Coraline. I haven't been Coraline since I was..."

"Since you were six years old, people still thought the earth was flat, and the Great Goddess had yet to ascend into the Heavens. I know. I know. You've said it a million..."

"If you know so much, why am I always the one running the show?"

"Because you like to? Duh." Camila scoffed. "You have had to be in charge since you popped outta your momma or burst outta your shell. However you decided to make your presence known. Hell, probably before that. Which brings me back to my point."

"Oh, there is one?"

"Don't take your nasty mood out on me. If only you would've..."

"What was your point?"

"My point is..." She drew out the words and added enough sarcasm to dredge most of the muck from the Hudson River and relocate it to The Swamp. *"That a half-Crane/half-Witch of your age should know better than to..."*

"And that's another thing!" I cut that crazy Crane off before she got out another word.

Yes! I was screeching both aloud and telepathically. Lately, it was happening way more than I liked to admit. It was either the good clean air of The Swamp polluting my brain or the fact that Camila hadn't stopped bitching since we got here. Either way, I was doing it, and I didn't like it. But I had a point to prove, and I was damn sure gonna prove it.

“If one more person, *especially you*, brings up how old I am, or for all that's holy – uses the phrase 'A Crane Witch Hybrid of a certain age,' I'm gonna grow feathers and peck 'em where the sun don't shine while I whip up a Spell to turn their hair lime green, their lips bright lilac and their feet so big they can't buy shoes – even from Joe Bob the tentmaker's sister, Sally Sue.”

“Yeah,” she burst out laughing. “*Just like the last one. You remember that one, don't you? The one you worked just about fifteen minutes ago. The Spell that went so wrong you're pacing a hole in the floor, waiting on Clementine Sue Cooper-Thomas to get here? Do you recall that one, Coraline?*”

“That's just so wrong,” I growled through gritted teeth. “You know that I'm....”

“*So out of practice using your Witchy Magic that you just....*”

“Camila C. Crane, I swear to the Goddess of All, if you don't change your tune and stop bringin' that up, I'm gonna....”

“*You're gonna what? Tie me up with the second set of designer jumper cables from the trunk of your car and leave me in the basement like you did...?*”

“You're really pushing it. You know that? You're just tryin' to make me....”

“*Oh, I'm the one who's pushing it? Is that the best you got?*” The cranky Crane snapped with a highly sarcastic and severely sassy snicker. “*How about we stop for a minute and talk about the piles, heaps, and bushels of bull crap you've been pushing my way lately?*”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“*What am I talking about? What am I...?*” With every word she tossed around, that crazy and cranky Crane I shared my soul with got louder and screechier.

Yes, that's a word. Trust me. I've been an editor, a publisher, a PR rep, and an Agent – and that's just the careers I've had in the last hundred years.

Nobody knows the English language better than me. Don't even think about tryin' to correct me. You. Will. Lose.

"I'm talkin' 'bout the fact that you had to move our collective feathered backsides down here to the dark side of the moon where people are named Jethro and Jed. I'm talkin' about the fact that Clementine and her buddies are called the Flock, and there's a nut house for the 'Shifterly Insane' called Bailmore Hall that looks like a good gust of wind could blow it over. And I'm talkin' about...."

"The fact that there is never any snow, the streets aren't crowded, people wave and smile every time you see them, and Clem lives just a mile and a half down the road. Oh, and there is no nosey ass, know-it-all Magpie named Maggie Mae Murgatroyd and her daughter, Mary Margaret, who want to trash my reputation, steal all my clients, and basically give me a heart attack at the very young age of...."

Knock! Knock! Knock!

"*Saved by the bell,*" Camila groaned.

"*It wasn't a bell. It was a knock.*"

"*Yeah, and you're not crazy... Just deranged.*"

"*Shut up, Camila.*"

"Nope. Not happening. And as I was saying, don't mess with me. I am the only one in the known world who knows how old you truly are, what the real color of your hair was before you gave up and let it go silver, and how many cups of coffee a day you really drink."

Deciding it was better to ignore Camila – because, well, it was the only thing I could do without losing what little was left of my mind – I raced to the door at the speed of light. Of course, because I am who I am and Fate has a wicked sense of humor, and Her greatest joy is fuckin' with me, the corner of the rubber on the tip of my kitten heel snagged in the fringe of the truly antique oriental rug (Yes, I have more than one. No, that does not mean that Camila was right.) I'd had it since I was too young to fly.

Arms swinging like I was impersonating a windmill, I tried to keep my rather well-rounded backside from hitting the very hard, very shiny – as mentioned before, very expensive - wooden floors I'd just had installed not a week earlier, with the grace of a million-pound Elephant walking on ice. Sadly, I was just about to lose the battle when the front door swung open with such force the gust of hot, humid Swamp air did its best to impersonate a hurricane. Fortunately, it damn near blew me upright.

Grabbing the highly polished brass knob for dear life, I just barely stopped the faceplant of the century when Clementine shrieked, “Somebody better be dead or dying! I was having ‘special time’ with my hunka-hunka-prehistoric hotness when you called and unintelligently shrieked like a Banshee. I flew out the door without the aid of my wings and jumped in the car through the driver’s side window. Then I just about took out my first-grade teacher and all her children while I was racing over Humpback Bridge. And as if that’s not enough, I have two different shoes on my feet, didn’t get to brush my hair, and dinner is burning in the oven.”

Not yet completely on even footing, I needed to get my surrogate daughter – a very loud, very pissed off at-the-moment Canary Shifter inside the house before all of Tallulu Parish knew there was a problem. So, I wrapped my hand around hers as it was waving up and down like an old pro because I was. Then holding on for dear life, I jerked her over the threshold, then tossed her across the room and onto the couch like we were auditioning for Cirque de Soleil.

On the tailwind of the aforementioned motion, I spun on my toes, slammed the door shut, let my back fall onto the thick, cool oak, and exhaled so hard the bright blond bangs on Clem's forehead blew upward – not to mention mine were standing at attention and might never ever never lay flat on my forehead again. But sometimes a Crane's gotta do what a Crane's gotta do.

Not waiting for Clem to resume screaming at the top of her lungs, I,

matter-of-factly and with great dignity, quietly announced, "There's a Dragon tied up with my spare set of designer jumper cables in my basement, and I need you to help me get rid of him."

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THE STORY THAT STARTED THE WHOLE DRAGON GUARD SERIES!



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“Dammit, Grace, pick up the phone,” she growled through gritted teeth at the third voicemail she’d had to listen to in the last five minutes.

“Everything okay, Kyndel?” Barney, the nice guy in her office, asked.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. Just trying to find Grace.”

“Oh! Anything I can help with?”

Kyndel thought about telling him her troubles, but Barney had been spending an inordinate amount of time in her office lately. At first, she’d thought he was just being nice, but then he joined her hiking group, and just yesterday he showed up with her favorite no whip, nonfat, iced white chocolate mocha from the frou frou coffee shop on the corner. It had been then Kyndel realized she was Barney’s newest crush. It had been a long time between boyfriends and Barney was nice, but...um...no. As flattered as she was, there was no way she was having an office romance.

‘Don’t shit where you eat’ was one of the pieces of sage advice Granny

had given her just after graduation. Not that it ever truly made sense to Kyndel, but she got the gist of it...keep your personal life out of the office.

She saw the puppy dog look on Barney's face and hated to crush his spirit, but Kyndel decided a brisk walk home would be better than leading the poor fellow on, in any way.

"No but thank you so much." Then, to make sure he got the hint and skeddaddled, she added, "Have a nice a weekend," before turning her chair and dialing Grace's office for the third time.

Voicemail again. Time to pack up and get the heck outta dodge before someone found something else for her to do. Bag on shoulder, scowl on face, and more than a little disgusted, Kyndel headed out of the office.

Never loan Grace the car... Never loan Grace the car...was the mantra playing on a loop in Kyndel's mind. She was madder than a wet hen and getting hotter by the minute. It was no fun to walk home after ten hours of work. No fun to be abandoned and forgotten by the best friend she'd loaned her car to. No fun to make the five-block journey past the park...in the dark.

At twenty-six, she rarely admitted her fear of the dark and held her aunts responsible for the phobia. Had they not made her watch 'The Brain Eaters' when she was only six years old, Kyndel was positive everything would've been just fine. It wasn't that she believed aliens would set loose a horde of parasites to eat every human brain on the planet; she had a little more sense than that. It was the feeling of being watched...like someone was hiding in the shadows, just waiting for an opportunity to scare the living daylights out of her. At the mere thought of her 'phantom stalker', the hair stood up at the nape of her neck and she walked a bit faster.

A sudden thud, and what sounded like footsteps pounding on the hard ground, had her stopping in her tracks. "What the...?" She gasped, opening her eyes wide, hoping it would help her see through the shadows.

Several tense seconds later—that felt like damn near forever—and Kyndel moved again. This time, her eyes slid side-to-side like the stupid

black and white cat clock her granny used to have in the kitchen.

The farther she got from where she'd heard the 'thump', the easier it was to convince herself it had just been kids sneaking into the park after hours. Manlove Park was a well-known make out spot for teenagers. There might've even been a time after moving to the city when Kyndel herself had been convinced to take a walk on the wild side, but that was a story for another day.

Shoot, now I wouldn't know the wild side if I tripped and fell in it.

It had been almost a year since she'd dated the muscle-headed jock from the gym. Three long, tortuous dates and all because he had an incredible body. Of course, dating the douche bag had come at a price. She'd spent the entire time listening to him drone on about his body parts...and not the good ones...and only when he wasn't checking out every other woman in the joint.

It wasn't that he'd hurt her feelings. Kyndel knew who she was and had never been under the misconception she would be Miss America. She had a few extra pounds and her curves had curves, but she was cute and had a brain, something not everyone could claim. What had pissed her off the most about dating Vinnie was, she'd wasted three whole evenings of her life that she could never get back. The one compliment the jerk had given her had been about her skin; he thought it was beautiful. Her granny always called her complexion peaches and cream and said her freckles added character.

Yeah, 'cause I need more of that.

She sighed as she thought about how much of her youth she'd wasted hating those tiny brown spots, until the day she realized they weren't going anywhere. It was time to buck up and learn to love them, or stop looking in the mirror. From that day forward, she stopped using makeup to cover them and embraced her 'freckled-self'. She also learned to accept her curves. If ya don't like em, don't look at em was her motto. For the most part, she ate right and worked out at least three times a week. But dammit if she didn't love her Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia and someone would lose a hand if they tried to

take it from her.

A loud ‘thud’ echoed between the buildings. Kyndel stumbled to a stop. She looked and listened. The longer she thought about what she’d heard, the easier it was for her to convince herself someone had yelled for help. So, for the second time in about as many minutes, she searched the inky shadows for signs of life. Her anxiety level quadrupled the longer she stood still. She wanted to scream when only the sound of leaves rustling across the sidewalk and the occasional car passing by reached her ears.

Disgusted, she grumbled aloud, “You’ve gone bonkers, Kyn.” The sound of her own voice somehow calmed her rankled nerves and she added, “Get to stepping, girlie.”

The clicking of her heels bounced off the brick wall of the library as she hurried past. Resuming her original mantra, she added Must kill Grace at the end for good measure.

“I swear when I get my hands on...”

Her words were cut short as the unmistakable sound of a man groaning came from the shadows.

A chill skittered down her spine.

Goose bumps covered her arms.

She counted to three, unable to move...simply listening...praying it was only her imagination. One deep breath later, she slid her right foot forward, prepared to make a beeline for home at a high rate of speed.

The groan came again. Closer than before. More desperate...almost pleading.

The need to help the injured grew within her. Turning towards the darkness, Kyndel searched for the source of the noise.

Shaking so much her teeth chattered, she looked for any sign of the man she knew needed her help.

“It’s time to make a decision, Kyndel. Fight or flight. What’s it gonna be? God knows standing like a bump on a log isn’t solving a damn thing.”

Flight won. She turned, almost running, her satchel clutched tightly to her side like a lifeline.

“Keep your head up and eyes front. Home’s only a few blocks away,” she reassured herself, with the promise of snatching her best friend bald for the stupid mess she was in.

Feeling guilty and worried for Grace, her heart at war with her brain, Kyndel thought aloud, “Hope everything’s okay...”

Grace had always been a little scatter-brained, but she’d never just forgotten Kyndel before. It bothered her that there’d been no answer at Grace’s office or on her cellphone when Kyndel had tried to track her down before leaving the office. She’d even taken a chance and tried her own home because Grace had a key, but only got voicemail there, too. It was a war between anger and worry that accompanied most of her thoughts about her friend lately.

The running joke was that Grace spent most of her time hooking up with eligible bachelors she met at work. The good Lord knew her bestie was gorgeous; five foot nine, long raven hair, blue eyes, and a curvy body without an extra ounce of fat. To top it off, she was a first-year lawyer, with a promising career. Grace had it all...brains and beauty, the total package.

Giggling nervously, she gave herself a mental swat to the back of the head. She didn’t want anything bad to happen to Grace, just a bump or bruise, even a hangnail would explain being left. If she really had just forgotten, Kyndel was going to be pissed and more than a little hurt.

The shadows seemed to be closing in. Fear pushed Kyndel until she was almost jogging in her sensible work heels. Looking over her shoulder, the toe of her shoe caught an uneven piece of concrete, and from one heartbeat to the next, she was falling forward. Arms flailing, mouth stretched wide in a wordless scream, the sidewalk racing toward her face, everything around her seemed to happen in slow motion. All she could think was that’s gonna leave a mark.

Bracing for impact, she squeezed her eyes tight and prayed...then nothing happened. Opening one eye, then the other, Kyndel found herself hanging above the sidewalk, looking at a pair of the biggest feet she had ever seen—and they were sexy.

Sexy feet? I really am losing it. Wait! Why the hell am I above the concrete?

Warmth radiated from the perfectly muscled arm wrapped around her midsection. Goose bumps emanated from the extra-large hand holding firmly to her blouse, just a little too close to her breast.

She wiggled to change position, the cushion of her well-rounded ass finding the ridges of an incredibly hard set of abs. She trembled. Her heart raced. Just the thought of the man that could hold her upright made up for all her previous mishaps.

Within just a few seconds, Kyndel's world turned on its axis. The scenery blurred as she was effortlessly spun around and immediately found herself sitting atop the body of her rescuer, looking at faded denim covering extremely muscular thighs. Laughing aloud, she asked herself, "Wonder what part I'll see next?"

The same muscled arm that had saved her face from certain demise now kept her upright. She did a one-eighty, draped her legs over his thighs, with her knees barely touching the sidewalk, and got her first look at the top half of her rescuer. All she could do was gape. He was absolutely the most handsome man she'd ever seen, with features that looked like they'd been carved by expert hands.

Even with his eyes closed, he gave off the distinctive air of authority. The dim light highlighted his high cheekbones and aristocratic nose, adding to the power she felt radiating from his every pore. His perfectly formed lips made visions of passionate kisses and hot sweaty nights dance through her brain. It didn't help that all he had on was a pair of well-worn blue jeans.

She imagined that denim riding low on his tapered hips when he stood,

highlighting the incredibly sexy dimples that sat on the front of his hips. She absolutely knew without looking they were there, and that simple bit of knowledge made her temperature rise another degree, despite the cool breeze.

At the touch of her fingertips against the cool skin of his neck, an electric current arced between them. Flashes of light burst before her eyes. She blinked to clear her vision, then felt for his pulse, strong and steady against her digit. Heat rose from his skin, making her worry he might have a fever. Her eyes wandered down his well-toned body. She scoffed, unsuccessfully trying to convince herself she was only checking for further injury.

Who the hell do you think you're fooling?

She continued her perusal, taking note of his massive shoulders and a chest that could've been sculpted from granite. The light smattering of hair that glistened in the shards of light from the streetlamps emphasized his nipples, which were pebbled from the cool breeze. Her mouth watered and her pulse raced.

What the hell is it about this guy? Is he doused in pheromones? Or am I in heat?

Her eyes landed on the best set of abs she'd ever seen. Unable, or maybe it was unwilling, to stop her hand, she traced the defined lines of his eight-pack, mesmerized by the feel of his skin beneath her fingers. The electricity continued to flow between them. The sound of a horn in the distance pulled her from her musing and brought her current situation into the glaring light of reality. The sexy man that had kept her from breaking her face on the concrete was out cold, and she was paying him back by sitting on his lap and copping a feel.

She scrambled to her feet, surprised her rescuer hadn't moved an inch during her less than graceful attempt to remove her butt from his lap. But there he lay, unmoving, except for the rise and fall of his chest. The longer he remained unconscious, the more panicked she became.

Looking up and down the street and cursing Grace for the hundredth time,

Kyndel wished for her car. First Aid class had taught her never to move an injured person unless you knew what was wrong. Not that she could pick him up and carry him, anyway. The dude was HUGE. At least six foot-three or four, and his muscles had muscles. She prayed he hadn't hit his head on the sidewalk. A concussion could be really bad if not treated.

“You're worried about a concussion now?” She scolded herself. “You've been drooling over the guy while his head is lying on the cold, hard sidewalk. Brilliant, Kyn, just brilliant.” Reaching for her satchel, she grabbed her old sorority sweatshirt from inside, wadded it up, and knelt forward to lift his head.

Her fingers tangled in his soft, brown hair. The scattered shards of light made it look like melted chocolate flowing over her skin.

Would it shine in the sun or maybe have highlights? Some lighter brown mixed with red, even a few blond streaks woven throughout?

The silky softness of his tresses turned to something wet and sticky.

Blood!

Kyndel gulped. Panic seized the breath in her lungs as the true severity of the situation smacked her in the face. She fought to keep her calm. Now, there was absolutely no denying he needed medical attention. Reaching into her bag and cursing herself for not thinking of it sooner, she dug around for her cellphone.

Coming up empty-handed, she instantly remembered plugging it into her car charger the night before, not giving it the slightest thought until that moment. Cursing and threatening death to anyone in the immediate vicinity, she sat back on her heels and thought.

All I know to do is run down the street for help.

Looking at the fallen man, then in the direction of the Mini Mart, she reasoned he'd probably be okay. She'd be gone five minutes...tops. Run in, use the phone, run back. It all seemed very logical, but fear something would happen to him in her absence kept her in place.

This guy was important to her. That alone had all her red flags flying and bells and whistles screaming in her brain. She tried to push her feelings aside and look at the situation with logic, but that was like holding back a freight train with her pinky finger...not gonna happen. Besides, her granny would most definitely haunt her and probably kick her butt if she turned her back on someone who needed help.

“No one’s gonna mess with this behemoth, even if he is unconscious,” she reassured herself. “He probably doesn’t have a wallet to steal anyway.”

Should she dig in his pockets to try to find one? Some kind of ID?

Nah.

She wasn’t keen on trying to explain her hand in his pants if he woke up. Her cheeks warmed at the thought of touching him again.

“What are you doing out at night in just a pair of jeans and bare feet, anyway?” she asked the unconscious man. “Guess it doesn’t matter. You need help, whether you’re dressed properly or not.”

Hooking her satchel over her shoulder, Kyndel stood and took one last look at her ‘patient’. Before she had barely moved an inch, a huge, warm hand latched onto her bare ankle.

“What the hell?” she screamed, trying to pull her leg free while looking down to see what new fresh hell had befallen her.

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ABOUT JULIA



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Hey Y'all! I'm Julia Mills the New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author of the Dragon Guard Series. I without a doubt admit to being a sarcastic, southern woman who would rather spend all day laughing than a minute crying. Living with my two most amazing daughters and a menagerie of animals, keeps me busy but I love telling a good story. Now, that I've decided to write the stories running through my brain, life is just a blast! My beliefs are simple. A good book along with shoes, makeup, and purses will never let a girl down and no hero ever written will compare to my real-life hero, my dad! I'm a sucker for a happy ending and alpha men make me swoon.

I'm still working on my story, but I promise it will contain as much love and laughter as I can pack into it! Now, go out there and create your own story!!! Dare to Dream! Have the Strength to Try EVERYTHING! Never Look Back! I ABSOLUTELY adore stalkers so look me up on [Facebook](#), sign up for my newsletter at [JuliaMillsAuthor.com](#) and follow me on [BookBub](#).

Send me a message!

XOXO Julia

ALSO BY JULIA



Find Them All [RIGHT HERE](#).

Although this epic journey travels through many Clans, many lands, and many couples, one thing remained constant -

Fate Will Not Be Denied.

Each book is written as a standalone story, but just like M&M's, Lay's Potato Chips, and my momma's queso, they're better when binged.

Dragon Guard Order

1. Her Dragon to Slay
2. Her Dragon's Fire
3. Haunted by Her Dragon
4. For the Love of Her Dragon
5. Saved by Her Dragon

Her Love, Her Dragon, A Dragon Guard Prequel

6. Only for Her Dragon
7. Fighting for Her Dragon
8. Her Dragon's Heart
9. Her Dragon's Soul
10. The Fate of Her Dragon

11. Her Dragon's No Angel
12. Her Dragon, His Demon
13. Resurrecting Her Dragon
14. The Scars of Her Dragon
15. Her Mad Dragon
16. Tears for Her Dragon
17. Guarding Her Dragon
18. Sassing Her Dragon
19. Kiss of Her Dragon
20. Claws, Class, and a Whole Lotta Sass
21. Dragon with the Girl Tattoo
22. Dragon Down
23. Twinkle, Twinkle, Sassy Little Star
24. Dragon Got Your Tongue
25. Fury
26. Dragon in the Mist
27. Dragon Got Run Over by A Reindeer
28. Tangled in Tinsel
29. Cupcake Kisses & Dragon Dreams
30. Her Dragon's Treasure
31. Aww Snap, Dragon
32. Imagine Dragon
33. Save a Horse, Ride a Dragon
34. Burn Dragon Burn
35. She Thinks My Dragon's Sexy
36. Dreamin' of a White Dragon
37. Dragon Her Home
38. Stone Cold Protector
39. Dragon's Lore
40. King Outta Water

41. Dragon, It's Cold Outside
42. Dragon, Be Mine
43. Rockin' Around the Dragon, Tree
44. Savage Protector
45. Dragon, Take the Wheel
46. Dragon Out the Tinsel
47. Marked by Her Dragon
48. Dragon's Assassin
49. Tempting Her Dragon
50. Who's Her Dragon



Dragon Guard Collections

- Dragon Guard Series: Volume 1
- Dragon Guard Series: Volume 2
- Dragon Guard Series: Volume 3
- Dragon Guard: The Thunder Rolls
- Dragon Guard: Enforcers Arise
- Christmas Magic: Dragon Guard Holidays Volume 1



Dragon Intelligence Agency

- Dragon Falling
- Dragon Dreaming



Dragon Guard Berserkers

Banning
Asher
Raynor
Dragon Guard Berserkers, Volume 1



Ladies of the Sky
Sadie's Shadow



Kings of the Blood
Viktor
Roman
Achilles
Kings of the Blood, Books 1 - 3



Dragons of Fate
Chestnuts Roasting Over Dragon Fire
Unwrapping Her Dragon
She Needs A Little Dragon
Falling Off Her Dragon
Dragons of Fate Collection, Books 1 - 4



Dragon of Destiny

Dragon Him Out To Sea



Dragon Guard Holiday Love Stories

It's The Great Dragon, Molly Brown

A Little Elfin' Around

Heart On For Dragon

Dragons Fall Hard

Dragon Guard Holiday Love Stories, Books 1 -3



Not Quite Holiday Love Stories

Kissing Cupid

Kissing Claws



Maidens of Mayhem

That Hound Don't Hunt

That Pig Gonna Fly

That Mule's Got A Kick

That Rex Gotta Roar

That Shark is Red Hot

That Dino's Hanging Ten

That Dragon Gonna Blow



Not Quite Love Stories

Vidalia

Phoebe

Zoey

Jax

Heidi

Lola

Sammie Jo

Harmony

Daphne



Magic & Mayhem Collections

The Not Quite Collection Volume 1

The Not Quite Collection Volume 2

Maidens of Mayhem Collection Volume 3

Maidens of Mayhem Collection Volume 4



Southern Fried Sass

Later Gator

Nosey Rosie

Lazy Daisy

Jamie's Got A Wand

Southern Fried Sass: Volume 1



Up Shift Creek

Tree Frog and Her Honey Badger

Doc and Her Dragon

Dusty and Her Dino



Daughters of Poseidon

Out of the Ashes

Scorched Embers



Lords of Hell

Hades Halo



A Vampire's Thirst: Alaric



Condemned: A Vampire Blood Courtesan Romance

Caught: A Vampire Blood Courtesan Romance



Marrok: Hunger For His Mate



Coloring Books

Bitch Please! I Color Dragons
Witch Please! I Color Dragons
Dragons of Legend Coloring Book



Planners

The Dragon Never Sleeps
No Rest for The Dragon



Reading Journals

On the Wings of Words

WANNA KEEP UP WITH ALL MY CRAZY?



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I absolutely LOVE stalkers! Here's all the links! Follow me everywhere!

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Maidens



Mayhem



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