



QUIRK OF FATES #3

THE MATING OF
Blind Billy Hipp

LISA OLIVER

The Mating of Blind Billy Hipp
A quirky meeting with a steampunk flavor
Quirk of Fates #3
By Lisa Oliver

The Mating of Blind Billy Hipp (Quirk of Fates #3)

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Dedication

*To all those people who dream of worlds unlike their own,
where life moves at a simpler pace, and love can jump into
your life even when you're not looking. My Quirk of Fates
books are for you my dear dreamers.*

*Huge thanks goes to Phil, Barry, and Holly from Publication
Pixie – thank you for keeping me going.*

Love Wins xx

Author's Note

At the end of February 2023 I celebrated my 100th published title done in nine years. This is book 101. I know it's a little different, but I do hope you'll come on this journey with me. My muse is stretching their wings, trying new worlds and time spans, but the basic premise of my stories stay the same. My men deserve the love they find even if they don't realize it, acceptance is a huge part of that love, and in the end, true love always wins.

Thank you so much for reading,

Hug the ones you love my dear friends,

Lisa xxx

Chapter One

Billy Hipp hated going into the city.

The congestion, the noise, the never-ending parade of fashion and self-importance put him on edge. Most of all, he hated the steam-driven machinery that ran it all. So many cogs and brass and ticking clocks, a never-ending array of polished levers and cold steel switches. He wanted the world to stop advancing, to return to the way things were, once upon a time. He much preferred the quiet of the countryside. The aspens and crickets and wide open sky gave him a sense of solace, whereas five minutes in the big smoke gave him heart palpitations.

He only went in when he absolutely had to. And it was always about work.

An outstanding debt of a hundred dollars qualified as absolute. That's how Billy found himself on the Steel City Express on an otherwise lazy Saturday afternoon. Someone had stiffed him on a payment, and he wasn't about to take it lying down.

Why the hell don't people do what they say they will?

It was how he conducted business. He and his client came to an agreement, they'd settle on a price, shake hands, and then Billy would deliver. He'd had been working under the same standards forever. Literally. Long before there were cities to travel into, when the world was a simpler place and easier to understand, Billy was a reliable and trustworthy Searcher. The best in the business.

But the business had changed. Though he had remained consistent and steadfast over the centuries, every new generation was slacker than the previous. It was grinding him down and wearing him out. And the wealthier the client, the more difficult they were to please.

Take the one he was chasing: Settembrini. The man had made his fortune in hotels, charging other members of the elite outrageous prices for clean sheets, a feather mattress, and lemon-scented water in the wash basins. Plus all the modern gadgets one had come to expect at Settembrini establishment.

Mechanical servants, steam pressed linens, and ice for drinks, made on site and delivered on demand.

Billy couldn't get his head around it. Why anyone would choose to spend a night in the city, let alone pay top dollar for it, was a mystery to him. Who could sleep with all that noise constantly assaulting a man's eardrums?

But a job was a job. Settembrini hired Billy to find his daughter. A teenage shifter, just coming through adolescence and discovering her inner wolf, had gone missing. The local law enforcement was swamped with cases like his, so he enlisted the services of a Searcher, to do what the police could not. Because he was rich, he could afford the best. And Billy was the best.

"Two hundred dollars to find my daughter," he had said. "One hundred up front, and the other upon delivery."

Billy knew where the young wolf shifters hung out. There was a grand park in the center of the city. A parcel of land and trees and lakes that was set aside by the early city planners as an oasis from the oppressive development. It contained dozens of secluded hideaway spots, where one foot could press down in the wild while the other stayed securely trapped in the hustle and bustle. Safe and dangerous all at once.

The young wolves would gather to grope one another and howl at the moon and engage in every kind of kinky, tantalizing offer they could dream up, yet still be able to get home at a decent hour and feed at the trough of their rich parents. Billy had never seen so much leather and fur and brass buckles together in the one place.

He'd asked around, called in a couple of favors, and eventually tracked her down. She was scared, cold, and hungry, but otherwise safe and unharmed. Her story was a familiar one. A soiree of extraordinary grandeur was being thrown. Exclusive invitation. All the right people would be there. Not to be missed. Food. Drink. Sex. Blood. Whatever a person's tastes, the night would not fail to satisfy and surprise.

Easy bait for the curious young. A secret destination would be given, with precise instructions to show up alone, tell no one, and then be transported by train or some kind of modern trap with wheels that moved on their own, no horse required. What rebellious kid could resist such an offer?

Most surfaced two or three days later, severely dehydrated, pale faced, and scared as hell. Each recovered easily enough with some fluids, protein and rest, but with one terrible change common to each: they could no longer shift.

Billy had found Settembrini's daughter soon enough, thankfully before she had received an invite to the 'party'. She was understandably pissed at him for dragging her home to daddy, kicking and screaming all the way. It was late, Billy was exhausted, and so he left her with the help in the foyer of the Settembrini mansion on the upper side of the city. He was assured a messenger would arrive at Billy's log cabin outside the city limits the following morning with the balance of his fee. No such messenger arrived.

He gave his client a few days grace to make good – sometimes delays happened - but still nothing came of it.

By Saturday morning, Billy had made the decision to collect what was owed him. He pulled on his cleanest linen shirt, polished his soft leather boots, and slipped into his black leather vest. Despite the circumstances, it was still a business call, and he always did his best to look professional. He strapped his belt around his waist, a holster housing his custom-built revolver with mother of pearl handle suspended on his left hip.

Billy made a point of sitting so he faced backwards in the railcar when heading into the city, so he could see the blurry reminder of green and open spaces as long as possible, before they gave in to the shadowy display of so-called advanced civilization. At least he couldn't see the machinery of the city in all its disgusting detail. Partial blindness had its advantages.

As the train pulled into the central station, Billy got up and was about to disembark, eager to get this unpleasantness over

with, when something caught his attention. The scent and sound of a small herd of young men struck his senses, and he turned towards the gathering with his limited sight. It was bright enough on the platform for him to make out half a dozen young bodies, bare chested save for leather strapping adorned with brass buckles crisscrossing their torsos. A blurred rope of some kind tethered them all together. Upon reflection, Billy concluded that it wasn't a rope at all, but a chain.

Because they were all laughing and talking freely with one another, Billy gathered they were more in costume than servitude. Role playing for some kind of Saturday night kink party that awaited them. Billy couldn't make out facial features very well, but judging from the outline of their perfect bodies and the familiar scent of powdered sweat and spunk that wafted off of them, they were prostitute for hire, and expensive ones at that. Billy didn't need 20/20 vision to comprehend how flawlessly beautiful each of them were. They were built that way.

"Automatons," Billy groaned. He'd heard about the advancements in clockwork creations recently but never encountered any so sophisticated as the ones he could almost see. The fact that they not only looked the part, but sounded and smelled like real people was both terrifying and intriguing. He may not be able to see them fully, but the right messages were sent to his brain and groin with perfect functionality. *That's going to some party,* he thought.

A release of steam along the station platform was Billy's cue to head off. He still had to hire a carriage to his client's estate, get his money, hopefully without too much fuss, ride back to the station and board a train home. He wanted to get back before dark, and soak the night away in his cast iron tub.

As the steam cleared, and just as he was about to make his way off the platform, who should emerge at the last possible moment but Settembrini himself.

Billy could have recognized the distinct smell of privilege, power, and entitlement anywhere. His client was flamboyantly dressed as usual, with a bright red top hat and matching waistcoat. Fuzzy vision offered no protection against that kind of outrageousness.

Gears and brass buckles adorned his sleeves and vest, and round tinted spectacles sat on the bridge of his nose. Something thin was strapped to his side, Billy noted. A riding crop! Billy rightly assumed it wasn't there for making horses run faster. The man had probably never been on a horse in his life.

Settembrini was flanked on either side by footmen who would see to his every need that evening. Well, not every need. The chain gang of pretty boy-bots stopped their chatter and followed the hotel magnate to a private train waiting for them one platform over.

Billy pursued at a discreet distance.

The small locomotive had three cars attached to it. It was built of polished steel and the way the light bounced off of it told Billy it had just come out of the factory and was awaiting its maiden voyage. Knowing Settembrini's deep pockets, it was not entirely out of the realm of possibility he'd had it built to his specifications. Billy observed as the entire party boarded the train. The blinds were all drawn on the windows, so no one on the platform could see inside. Luckily that meant that no one on the inside could see out either.

The engine hissed into effort and the wheels began to turn. Steam flooded the station as the private locomotive made its way out. Billy walked quickly along the side, picking up his pace as the train moved faster, breaking into a light run by the time the observation car was within reach. He wrapped his strong grip around the hot steel of the car's railing, and hoisted himself up.

He rode along patiently until they were clear of the station. There was no point in making his presence known when other people might intervene. The door to the observation car

opened easily and Billy strode in. It was handsomely decorated. Thick rugs were spread across the floor, and ornately framed oil paintings hung on the walls. Billy couldn't tell what the subject of the paintings were, and frankly couldn't have cared less. In the middle of the car was an enormous bed fit for an emperor and his entourage.

Billy made his way around the colossal mattress. He could only imagine the activities that would soon take place there and smiled at the thought of it. A rolling orgy along the tracks, chugging through the forest and mountains? Not a bad way to spend a Saturday night, he had to admit. Shame it would be with machines, but to each his own.

He opened the door on the opposite end of the car and jumped across to the next one with dexterous ease. He leaned his ear against the door.

“Gentlemen, the game is Five Card Stud.”

He recognized Settembrini's voice immediately. Thick and slow, like his tongue was forever floating in a bowl of molasses. The voice of a man who sounded like he was never in a hurry to get anywhere ever. At a time when steam engines were becoming more and more efficient, making everything move faster and faster, Billy had to admit that such a way of talking was a kind of power. Credit where credit was due.

He undid the clasp on his holster, freeing up his pistol.

Settembrini continued speaking. “Five Card Stud with five studs in my carriage. Win or lose, boys, it's going to be a fine evening.”

Billy clicked open the door as silently as he could and soundlessly stepped inside. The five bots, who moments before had been standing on the platform, were now sitting around a card table. The costumes were the same with one small exception: each had been undressed further, and sat in their undershorts - matching red silk. Grateful for the splash of blurry color concealing their carefully manufactured genitalia, Billy announced himself.

“Hope, I’m not interrupting anything.” Billy spoke with a voice calm as a swimming hole on a summer afternoon. “But you and me got some unfinished business, Signor.”

“Blind Billy Hipp, what a pleasant surprise indeed.” Settembrini spoke without looking up from his hand of cards, entirely unfazed by Billy’s presence. “You’re not interrupting a thing. Have a seat and play with us if you like. I believe everyone else around the table has lost their shirts, so your chances of winning are not too shabby.”

“No thanks, Signor. Just here to get what I’m owed, and I’ll be on my way. Leave you to play with your... toys.”

“What you’re owed? Now pray tell, what is it you’re owed, my good man? I don’t like to be in anyone’s debt, least of all a Searcher such as y’self. Hell, I wouldn’t sleep well at night knowing I owed you.”

Billy kept his hand close to the handle of his gun. “We both know you haven’t paid up on the job I did for you. I’d like my hundred dollars before you get too far along in the night’s scheduled activities.” Billy tilted his head towards the sleeping car and the massive bed housed within. Settembrini laughed a slow, thick, carefree cackle, the phlegm from his throat rising up and causing his jowls to shake.

“A hundred dollars?” He let fly a deep sonorous whistle. “That’s a mighty sum indeed, Blind Billy. All the more reason for me to not have let it slip my mind. Now either the deposits are dreadfully low in my memory banks, or you’re making an embarrassing mistake, Mr. Hipp.”

Billy reached into his breast pocket for a piece of paper. The gesture caused all five of the half-naked bots to jump out of their faux skin.

“Relax, my dears,” Settembrini cooed. “His gun is at his side, not in his shirt. No need to be so twitchy. Save your energy for later. I promise you’ll need every manufactured drop of it.”

Billy slammed a sheet of paper on the poker table, scattering multi-colored chips and cards in the process.

“That there is a contract for the search and delivery of your daughter. The agreed upon fee was two hundred dollars. A hundred up front, and the balance upon delivery. I found and delivered her to you as per the terms of our agreement. You owe me a hundred bucks, and I ain’t leaving here without it.”

Settembrini looked up from the table. His eyes were suddenly reddened with sorrow and worry. “She walked right out again the very night you dropped her off. I didn’t even get to hug my little princess. By the time the sun came up, she was gone. I haven’t seen her since.”

Billy cast a blurry glance around the table. “I can tell you must be terribly broken up over it.”

“We all deal with grief in our own way, Mr. Hipp. I wouldn’t dare judge you on your methodology. I would hope one as professional as yourself would turn a blind eye to mine.”

“Partially blind, thank you very much, but it’s not my eye you should be concerned with.” Billy gripped his gun. “I’m right sorry to hear that your girl ran out on you again. Kids at that age are spontaneous, shifters especially so. But it’s hardly my concern. You hired me to find and deliver your daughter. I did my part. What happens after that is out of my hands.”

Settembrini poured himself another whiskey. “Nevertheless,” he said, “I find myself in the same state of loss as I was before engaging your services. Hell, I should be asking you to compensate me a c-note given the circumstances, but I’m a gentleman. As far as I’m concerned we’re even, and the matter is forthwith closed. Now. If you’d like to sit down and try your hand with the boys here, you might just win your hundred dollars back plus an evening full of sweet android ass in your face...”

The sharp ring of gunfire halted Settembrini’s speech. Billy had drawn his revolver swiftly, and there it was, smoking in his hand. A new hole appeared in the fine upholstered wingback chair Settembrini was sitting on, proof a hot bullet was nesting there.

“I’m not asking again,” Billy said. “The next shot goes straight for your family jewels, Signor. Either my money or something far more unsightly will be on the table by the time I get to five.”

Settembrini swallowed hard as Billy started to count.

“One. Two. Three...”

Chapter Two

Dathan was coated with a fine film of sweat as he stepped into the lobby of his apartment building. He was among the new breed of the elite who chose to live high above everyone else. The traditional members of the upper class considered ground floor living to be the domain of the rich and powerful. But Dathan preferred to be elevated. His aunt, whose fingers held the purse strings of all Dathan's wealth, tried to tell him that the upper suites were reserved for servants and footmen.

"Why would you want to live in - gasp - an attic?"

But he paid her no heed. Dathan knew she wouldn't hold back on funding where he chose to live. Through her he was able to purchase the land, build the structure according to his own wishes, and even had a private lift installed that took him to his top floor suite in no time at all. It was the talk of the town at first, and he happily passed all the credit on to his uncle, furthering the man's reputation as a forward thinker. Dathan preferred not to have attention drawn to himself.

A doorman greeted him as he arrived, holding the brass and glass doors open and tipping his hat in cordial greeting.

"Good evening, Master Dathan."

"Good evening, Sanders."

"Lovely night, sir."

It was a warm night, made all the more so due to Dathan's exploits of the last few days. His long dark waistcoat was left open, no shirt on his back. His dark tailored pants were rolled up to the knees and he walked on bare feet.

"Shall I order another new pair of boots for you, sir?" Sanders asked, noticing his bare feet.

Dathan looked down, and seemed just as shocked at his lack of footwear as the doorman.

"Uh... yes, if you would please, Sanders. I can't think what would have happened to the old ones."

“I’m sure someone will find them and put them to good use, sir. Not to worry.”

Dathan smiled at the doorman’s refined sense of decorum. Sanders said the same thing every time Dathan returned home from one of his outings, often wearing even less than what he had on when he’d originally left the building.

“Anything interesting happen while I was away?” Dathan asked as Sanders lifted the lid on a steel compartment attached to the wall. A hot towel was lifted out with a delicate pair of forceps, and Dathan relished the luxury of wiping it across his face. He lifted his legs one at a time, and Sanders dutifully knelt to wipe a second towel along the bottom of his dirtied feet.

“Oh, the usual news, sir, I’m afraid. More and more young wolves disappearing and turning up unable to shift.”

Dathan nodded. The problem was getting worse.

“And what does my uncle have to say about it all?” he asked.

“The Police Commissioner is taking the stance that it must be the work of a vengeful vampire or some such character, Master Dathan. Your uncle is doing quite well at convincing the populace that the matter is a private dispute between shifters and vampires, and of no great threat to the public at large.”

Dathan cleared his throat. The city used to embrace the shifter community and tolerate the vamps. It would seem that was changing, at least on the tolerance part and his uncle was a major cog in pushing that change.

But that was not something to discuss with Sanders. “My uncle has always been very clever at systematically telling the public what to think and then asking for their honest opinion.”

“A politician through and through, sir.”

“Indeed.”

With clean feet and a refreshed face, Dathan made his way across the marble tiled foyer to his personal elevator car. Since

nobody else lived in the building, every elevator was private and personal. Someday he would make the other floors available for rent or simply invite whomever he wanted to live there free of charge.

The polished brass of the elevator car doors caught the day's dying light as they opened with a loud exhalation of pressurized steam.

"Enjoy your evening, sir."

"Thank you, Sanders." Dathan smiled once more at his trusted servant as the cogs turned soundlessly behind the walls drawing the doors closed and lifting him up.

/~/~/~/~/

Dathan spent the ride to the top floor thinking about what was happening to his fellow shifters. Though he wasn't a wolf shifter - his animal was considerably less volatile - he still cared about their plight. He would talk with his uncle at the next opportunity to discuss what further action might be able to be taken for them.

When the lift released its steamy sound, the doors opened, and he approached his apartment. He stopped momentarily when he noticed that his front door was slightly ajar.

Slowly peering inside, his nerves were on edge. Dathan found it unbelievable to think a burglar would have gained access all the way up to his living quarters, but he didn't want to be reckless about his safety either.

"Ah, there you are. Finally."

"Aunt Charlotte! What a... pleasant surprise."

His aunt was sitting back on his settee, a crystal glass of gin in her hands. His gin. Well, her gin. Everything in the apartment, including the apartment itself, came from her money.

"I've been waiting here for hours. Where have you been, Dathan darling?"

Hours. He smiled to himself. If only she knew he had been gone for days.

“I was out for a run, Auntie dear. However did you get in here? I don’t recall giving you a key.”

“Sanders let me in, of course. How do you think? Such a sweet man. Does what he’s told.”

“He never mentioned it when I saw him downstairs. It’s not like him to keep secrets from me.”

Dathan, suddenly remembering the state of his undress, felt his face go warm.

“He never mentioned it,” Charlotte admonished, “because I told him not to mention it. Honestly, Dathan, if you knew I was up here you would have turned tail and run off to the hills for who knows how long.”

He couldn’t argue with that. The last person he wanted to see at any time was his Aunt Tottie.

“Besides, we both know you’re far more forgiving than I am. Sanders knows it, too. Had he disclosed the fact that I was awaiting you up here, he would have been fired and left to starve in the streets. The man knows what’s best. It’s why we keep him around you.”

Dathan found himself nodding along. He’d heard this speech a thousand times before.

“I’m going to bathe if you don’t mind. Please make yourself at home... more than you already have.”

Charlotte stood up and downed her drink in one impressive gulp.

“Your bath can wait.”

She approached and ran her fingertip down his still glistening chest. Her familiarity with Dathan had always made him uncomfortable, ever since he was a young boy.

“You’re awfully damp with perspiration, dear boy. Running you say. How long were you gone this time? Be honest with

me, Dathan. You know I can always tell when you're lying."

He sighed and lowered his head. "Since Wednesday."

She let slip a slight gasp of shock. "Three days? Where on earth do you run for three days?"

His eyes lit up at the chance to share his most prized experiences. "Oh, Aunt Tottie, the world goes on forever once outside the city. There are forests and mountains and wide open prairies. I could run for weeks. Months. If I had my way..."

He stopped, carried away by his blissful enthusiasm.

"Yes, if you had your way, you'd never shift back from your horse state and run wild in the feral forests and fields for the rest of your days." She tussled his long dark hair as if he were a child. "But you love the city life too much to give it all up."

It was true. Dathan did love the city, but only when he stood on two legs in human form. His horse, for obvious reasons, longed always for wide open spaces and the endless sky above.

"Will you ever grow up?"

"I'm grown up, Auntie. A full-fledged man when it suits me, you, and everyone else for me to be one. I'm twenty-five, remember."

"Yes, your body may be twenty-five, but your mind is still that of a boy. Playing wild horses all day? What if you get spotted? It would destroy your uncle's career and everything this family has built up over multiple generations."

Dathan rolled his eyes. "Are we really going to have this conversation again?"

He crossed to his telescope that pointed out the east facing window. It was fully mechanized, able to calibrate itself automatically with the rotation of the earth. A complicated series of gears and dials, built by the world's top astronomical engineer, were buried deep beneath the polished metallic

exterior. Dathan closed one eye and peeked through the view finder.

“I won’t get spotted. I’ve been doing this since I first started shifting as a teenager. Haven’t I been careful all this time? No one knows that it’s me. If anyone were to see, which they rarely do by the way - I know how to stay hidden when I want to - they’d only see a plain old horse galloping around a meadow. Not unlike any of the hundreds - nay, thousands - running free out there every day of the week.”

Charlotte helped him off with his jacket. Dathan flinched as he lifted his right arm.

“What is it?” Charlotte asked.

“Nothing,” he said, waiting for the pain to subside.

“Dathan?”

“Just a sore shoulder, that’s all. I stepped in a gopher hole while running, and pulled something. It’s nothing serious. Just a bit stiff. A hot bath and a good night’s sleep and I’ll be right as rain.”

He folded his arms across his bare chest to hide his awkwardness at being exposed before his aunt.

“Poor thing. I’ll run your bath and rub it for you. Make my little nephew all better.”

“I’m fine, Aunt Tottie, really. You don’t need to dote on me anymore.”

“I promised your mother...”

“Oh, not again, please...”

His protestations fell on deaf ears as she continued. “I promised your mother I would care for you as she herself would have. As she lay...”

“...dying in your arms... yes, yes, yes, so you’ve said a billion times...”

“...’please take care of my Dathan and see to his every need. Promise me. Promise me!’ And I promised her.”

Dathan watched as she acted out the final words of his dying mother. He was so young when his parents passed away that he had no real memories of them. He used to love his aunt’s performance as a kid, but it no longer held the charm it once had. Besides, he just wanted to climb into the tub and soak his aching limbs.

“You should have been on the stage, Aunt Tottie. You know that.”

“You think?” She spun around, as if to model her latest costume. She loved to spend a fortune on clothes and kept up with the latest fashions. Today, she was wearing a white corset tied up with black leather straps. Around her neck was a dark collar with brass buckles, and her tall boots ran up to her knees. Her wrists were adorned with a series of steel bracelets, in ascending order of width and thickness. Each was custom made, of course, and the larger ones served as perfume dispensaries, releasing a fresh mist at the tap of a button.

“I could have been a star!”

She was an attractive woman. His mother’s youngest sibling, Tottie was only a decade or so older than Dathan, and exhaustingly flirtatious. He long suspected that she housed a collection of lovers, both men and women, shifters, and vamps. Whether his uncle knew about them as well was another matter altogether, and none of Dathan’s business.

“Instead, you married Uncle William and now play the role of dutiful wife and supporter.”

“Don’t remind me,” she said as she lifted the decanter of gin and tilted it towards her glass, then stopped. “Better not,” she said to herself and set the bottle down.

Dathan walked to the door. “If there’s nothing else, Aunt Tottie, thanks ever so much for dropping by. Next time, please wait until I’m here. You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

She leaned in and kissed both of Dathan’s cheeks in farewell.

“Do give my love to Uncle Willy.”

“Oh, yes!” Charlotte spun around on the heel of her boot, the decorative metal spur spinning as she executed her pirouette.

“That’s what I came here to tell you: your uncle needs a favor.”

“From me? I can’t imagine what.”

“A friend of his, a very wealthy friend, very powerful, has been the victim of a crime. Because of his friend’s standing in the community, the case has gone all the way up to the Commissioner’s office and your uncle has directly involved himself. An identity parade will be conducted first thing Monday morning, and he wants you to stand as a potential suspect in the lineup.”

“Suspect?” Dathan’s eyes nearly sprung out of his head.
“Me?”

“Oh, don’t look so alarmed, darling. You’re not a real suspect. He just needs you to fill out the line a bit. Apparently the transgressor was tall, dark, and impossibly handsome. I recommended you, of course.”

“Ach, Auntie, is it really necessary? There’s no shortage of souls roaming the streets out there who would welcome a distraction like that.”

“That may be, but it’s not a bad idea to be ever so slightly in your uncle’s debt, Dathan. You know he’s a strong candidate for mayor in the upcoming fall election, and once he gains control of this city... well, imagine how you might gain by it.”

“I have more than enough from you both as it is,” Dathan protested.

“I think he wants you there to keep an eye on things, to be honest.”

“Or for things to keep an eye on me,” he replied.

“Six of one, half a dozen of the other. Eight o’clock. Main precinct. Promise you’ll be there?”

Dathan sighed. He hadn't the energy to argue anymore.

"I promise."

"Good boy. Now. Go soak that shoulder of yours and get a good night's sleep. Kisses!"

He closed the door behind her and rinsed her glass as the tub filled with water. He had insisted on indoor plumbing and hot running water. The boiler tank in the basement of the building was a marvel of modern innovation and cost a fortune to both install and maintain. As he settled into the steaming solace of a tub instantly filled with soothing warmth, he could feel his shoulder relax at last.

"Worth every penny," he said to himself as he soaked his aches away.

Chapter Three

Billy spent his Sundays cleaning out his cabin and trimming the grounds. There were always trees that needed pruning, fences that needed mending, and floors that needed sweeping. He had the means to hire someone to do it for him, but he found the mundane routine was like a form of prayer. So, he did it himself every week.

That particular Sunday got off to a later start than usual as he enjoyed a rare morning of sleeping in. After retrieving his money the night before, the train back out of the city was delayed, and he ended up waiting a few hours on the platform. That was the problem with the modern technological world he lived in: stuff broke down. The idea that endless gizmos and gadgets would make life more convenient was, in Billy's head, a load of bullshit. In the end it only served to hold everything up.

Billy made a point of keeping nothing modern on his property. In a world of steel and springs and cogs, he preferred wood and rock. Products of the earth. His floor was hardwood, his front step made from stone which he quarried and hauled himself up from the riverbed. His clothes were all natural fibers: cotton, linen, and denim. And leather, of course. He used to brew his own beer and distill his own whiskey, but had lost the taste for it over the centuries. He still baked bread in his wood fired oven, made his own cheese, and churned his own butter. All of it reminded him of where and when he came from, and seemed to settle him back into the calm of his past.

As he opened his door to let out the flies that sought shelter in his kitchen, he noticed a figure standing next to the large aspen tree that separated his property from the main road. The stranger was just standing there still as a post, neither advancing nor retreating. Billy turned his head slightly, bird-like, to try and get a better look.

The stranger wore a bright shirt with a dark jacket. Billy could make out the long silky tails billowing behind him. A black bowler hat sat atop his head. The wind shifted direction, and

he picked up the stranger's scent. His partial blindness enhanced his sense of smell, and what he lost in vision, he gained in olfactory ability. His sniffer was as sharp as a wolfhound's.

Talcum powder and the fruity scent of soap wafted into his nostrils, along with the unmistakable aroma of expensive cologne. Billy knew there was no one within a hundred miles of his middle-of-nowhere cabin who kept themselves as clean smelling as that. The stranger was clearly a city dweller.

“Are you the Searcher?”

Billy leaned against the frame of his front door. His gun was resting on the counter, within easy reach, so he had no need to move for a conversation – a short one at that. And it would be short.

“Maybe. Maybe not. You need one?”

“What I need is a Finder. I hear you're the best.”

The stranger's voice was refined and educated, but young. Seventeen, eighteen at best. Billy knew the type immediately: rich offspring of money-loving city dwellers, ready to throw daddy's dollars around whenever it suited them.

“Flattery will get you nowhere, son. Hell, it might even get you in the wrong kind of trouble if you're not careful with it.”

“I'm not seeking to flatter, Mr. Hipp. Simply speaking the plain truth as I see it. I'd like to hire you to find something of mine that's gone missing.”

“Oh yeah?” Billy replied as the stranger started walking forward. He tapped an ebony cane as he walked. There was nothing wrong with the boy's stance, so clearly the cane was part of his image. “And what would your missing item be?”

“A horse, sir. And a very valuable one at that.”

The stranger kept approaching, and once he got about halfway to the house, Billy held up his hand.

“That's far enough. You got a name, kid?”

“Wendell. Oliver Wendell.” The young man cleared his throat self-consciously. “The third.”

Billy knew the Wendell name. Everyone within five hundred mile radius of his house knew the Wendell name. Oliver Wendell - the first or second of the line - was the genius inventor and mechanical mastermind behind the design of the city’s so-called advanced technology. He was also the maker of a vast collection of robotic creations and automatons. The boy-bots Billy encountered the night before were Wendell products. His clients and buyers included heads of state, universities, and the powerful wealthy capitalists that made up the so called ‘elite’. Oh yes, Billy knew the name, but wanted absolutely nothing to do with it.

“Didn’t know you were into horses, Mr. Wendell.”

“My father was. I loved watching him with them in our stables when I was a boy. Now that he’s gone...”

Oh, yeah. Oliver Wendell had died some months back, leaving his vast fortune to his one and only son. Billy remembered hearing the locals talk about it at the general store he frequented for supplies.

“... that extraordinary animal was under my care. I loved him as my father did. Which is why I need your help to get Fountain back.”

“Fountain?” Billy repeated the name with a furrowed brow. It was a strange name for a horse.

“Short for Fountain of Youth. His name is registered in the National Stud Book. He’s a racehorse and is slated to run his first race in the upcoming derby. With your help, of course.”

Wendell attempted another step forward, but Billy stopped him once again with his upturned hand. “Afraid it will have to be without my help. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a few more chores to do before dinner. “

Billy turned to go back inside when the sound of Wendell’s voice stopped him dead in his tracks.

“I’ll pay you a thousand dollars, Mr. Hipp. Five hundred now and five hundred when you bring my Fountain home to me.”

Billy couldn’t help but laugh out loud. He started coughing, nearly choking, on the outrageous sum being dangled before him. “That’s an awful lot of money to find a horse thief, son.”

“Do you keep horses on your place, Mr. Hipp?”

Billy shook his head. “I do not.”

“Have you ever?”

“I have some experience with horses, if that’s what you’re asking.” Billy’s thoughts raced back to a time before time, when he could see the entire world without hindrance. And his entire world back then was centered around one animal in particular that he loved more than life itself. It pained him to think of it.

“Then you understand. I know you understand.” Wendell’s voice modulated with an equal blend of eagerness and desperation. “And I further know you’re honorable and trustworthy, and that you’ll do what you say you will. That kind of work ethic is worth a hundred thousand dollars as far as I’m concerned.”

“Honorable?” Billy couldn’t help but snort at that. It was true, but a far cry from the reputation that had proceeded him for so very long. “What makes you think I’m honorable?”

“My father always taught me to ask around before getting into bed with someone,” Oliver said, then blushed at his choice of words. “I mean in the sense of doing business with someone.”

Billy grinned widely. *Is this poor little rich kid flirting with me?* He stole another imperfect glance at the costumed figure before him. If one were to unsnap the buckles, unfasten the clasps, and strip the pageantry away, Oliver Wendell the Third would be stunning. Young, lean, with broad shoulders and tight ass. Men like him weren’t Billy’s type at all, but he could see that Wendell was beautiful enough. Maybe in twenty years, or better yet a hundred and twenty years, he’d be worth a second look for Billy. But not now.

“A man like you, with your moral worth, doesn’t come around very often.”

Billy couldn’t argue with that. Most Searchers did a half-assed job and left a mess along the way. Billy always prided himself on doing his absolute best when called upon.

“Of course, if the money itself is not enough, I’d be happy to...”

Billy laughed again. “To be honest with you, kid, it’s about five times more than the most I’ve been paid for a job before. The money is more than enough and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“See what I mean? A straight talking, straight shooting, straight dealing...”

“Enough already.” Billy was on the verge of getting embarrassed. “There’s not much straight about me at all.”

“Me neither.” He could hear in Oliver’s voice the tone of hopeful anticipation.

“Whoa, kid. Stand down.” Nobody likes rejection, and Billy didn’t want to hurt the young man’s feelings. “I tend to not mix up my work with my social life. Bad for business.”

“*C’est la vie, c’est la vie.*” Oliver pouted for a few seconds then flashed a million dollar smile which brightened the featureless face considerably. “Does that mean we’re in business together then?”

Billy sucked his lips over his teeth and chewed the possibility of the job around as he spoke.

“Not yet. I need to know a bit more first. What can you tell me about Fountain’s disappearance?”

Oliver kept that smile flashing. “He was taken in the middle of the night.”

“When?”

“A couple of weeks back. Late Tuesday, early Wednesday. Somewhere in between.”

Billy nodded. "New moon that night. It was pretty dark, so your thief knew what he was doing."

"It was dark, yes. Pitch black. But I saw him."

Billy turned his face towards Oliver, eyebrows skeptically raised. "You did, did you? Mm-hmm. And did he see you?"

"No sir. Not a chance. But I got a good long look at his face. I've already given the police a description. In fact, the Commissioner is arranging a lineup of suspects tomorrow morning, so all we need to do is show up, point him out and..."

"Whoa, son, slow down. They're ain't no we yet. Just you."

Oliver bit down on the cheek of his excitement.

Billy spoke slow and low. "And if it's gonna be that easy to find your man, then why do you need to hire a Searcher? Seems a hefty fee to pay someone to tag along on a run-of-the-mill identity parade."

Oliver's enthusiasm picked up again. Billy could tell that he had an answer for everything.

"Fingering the thief is the easy part. I need you to find Fountain and bring him back safe and sound. I reckon whoever took my horse will not willingly disclose his whereabouts."

"Mm-hmm." Billy fixed his half-empty gaze towards the east where the afternoon sun had dipped below the hills. "One more question, Mr. Wendell. How did you manage to see the thief on the darkest night of the month, get a 'good long look at his face' as you say, and not have been close enough that he'd have seen you?"

"With these."

Oliver removed a metallic ball about the size of an egg from the breast pocket of his seersucker jacket and pressed a tiny button. The ball folded itself out, inch by inch, until it formed a pair of odd spectacles. He came forward, handing them to Billy. They were more goggle than eyeglass, and sat heavy in the hand. A glass lens was surrounded by steel encasements,

and Billy could feel a hundred tiny rivets holding the apparatus together.

“The Genesis One Three,” Wendell announced. “A seeing device invented by my father. Go ahead, try it on.”

Potent curiosity overcame Billy’s critical senses at that moment, and he found himself tugging on the springy leather of the back strap. He pulled the device onto his head and adjusted the intricate lenses to fit comfortably over his own two eyes. A flash of brightness took him by surprise, and he gasped in shock.

“God damn!”

“Let light shine out of the darkness”. Oliver quoted chapter one, verse three of the first book of the bible as Billy took in the crisp and clear world around him.

“How on earth...?” Billy didn’t even know how to form the question, he was so overwhelmed by the visual information coming in. He had long ago forgotten about depth perception, peripheral vision, and clarity of detail... things a full-sighted person took for granted.

Oliver clearly saw he was hooked and did his best to explain how it worked. “The device sends information to the brain via the optical nerve, bypassing whatever impediments to light that are preventing the eyes from working on their own. The brain doesn’t know if it’s day or night, or whether or not there’s a cataract clouding the lens of the eye. It doesn’t know, and it doesn’t care.”

Oliver’s hands reached up to Billy’s face. Billy instinctively grabbed them both and held them firm.

“I was only going to adjust the strap a bit, loosen it so it was more comfortable for you,” Oliver explained.

“A man loses his edge when he gets too comfortable.” Billy pulled the specs off.

“*C’est la vie, c’est la vie.*”

“Are you a Frenchman, Mr. Wendell?”

“Oh?” Wendell sounded startled at the question. “No, no. It’s just an expression I picked up on my travels and employ from time to time. Such is life, I think it means.”

“I’m aware of what it means,” Billy replied. “Just don’t hear it said much around here.” He handed the goggles back to Wendell. “That is one hell of an invention, that’s for damn sure. Must be worth a pretty penny.”

“Like many of my father’s sidelines, he never got around to selling this one. Built it solely to enjoy reading all night long without the aid of a torch. I don’t think he even considered its potential. But yes, the value of it on the open market would be extraordinary.”

Oliver pressed the small button on the side of the device, and it folded itself back up into a metal ball. He slipped it into his pocket.

“Take this job, and I’ll throw in a pair custom made for you. On top of the cash.”

Billy wasn’t sure he could speak, his mind flooded with memories of a time when he could see perfectly well without the Genesis One Three. It was overwhelming, the goggles bringing back emotions and memories Billy thought were lost. He felt like he may start crying at any moment.

“So do we have a deal, Mr. Hipp?”

“I’ll think about it,” was all Billy could say as he slipped back inside his cabin and let the screen door swing closed with a loud clap behind him.

“Tomorrow morning. Eight o’clock. Main precinct in the city. If you’re in, I’ll see you there.”

Billy heard Oliver calling out the information but offered no reply. He was spooked by the experience – actually seeing for the first time in more years than he could count - and didn’t want any sign of weakness to show on his face or manifest in his voice.

A large part of him didn't want to take the job, didn't trust it. He wasn't sure he trusted Wendell. But then an equally large part of him knew he had to, and that Billy had already accepted it on some level. He felt committed in his flesh, in his bones, and for some ineffable reason deep down in his groin. It wasn't arousal or good old fashioned horniness that was being stirred up, but something far more primal.

That kind of commitment scared the shit out of him.

Chapter Four

There were four other suspects gathered in the viewing room when Dathan arrived through the back door of the police precinct. All were variations on the classic tall, dark, and handsome type. Two twin brothers dressed in gothic black tails, suede vests, and silky capes with blood red lining. Neither looked at all happy to be in a brightly lit waiting room at eight o'clock on a Monday morning. The other two were similar in that each had strong jaw lines, deep dark eyes, and beards in various stages of growth. One was fully bearded while the other sported a devil's goatee.

Dathan himself was clean shaven, bathed, and wearing a three-piece ash grey tailored suit. His freshly shampooed mane was tied up in a ponytail, *or horse tail* he thought with a grin.

The five of them looked as if they were there to pose for an oil painting or for one of those photographers who hid their faces in a box and flashed a bright bomb above. He remembered why he was there and considered the fact that one of these men was potentially a criminal. Then again, he considered the scene from the perspective of his look-alikes; they must have been thinking the same thing about him.

"Any chance a steam-pressed espresso could be brought in?" Dathan directed the question to the warder. He was met with a grunt and half a laugh. Nobody knew Dathan, and certainly didn't suspect he was the Police Commissioner's nephew. He wasn't entitled to any special treatment, but figured there was no harm in asking.

Each of the suspects was handed a piece of card stock with the numbers one through five written in bold black ink on one side. Dathan was given number three.

"Line up in your numerical order, please. Number one at that end, five over there, facing this way."

Each man followed the orders dutifully, so Dathan did as well. He stood in the middle. Standing shoulder to shoulder with four men who bore more than a passing resemblance to

himself might have been unnerving under different circumstances. Dathan considered it exciting.

Besides, he was being paid two whole dollars for a few moments of his time. The large coins felt strange in his purse bag which hung inside his freshly pressed pants, side by side with his prick. The coins felt odd because it was the first time in his life that Dathan had ever been paid for work, if that's what standing in a line up could be considered being. *Money in exchange for time. This is how the rest of the world live. What a strange existence*, he thought.

"Make sure your numbers are right side up. Number three?"

Dathan was still lost in thought.

"Number three!" The warder raised his voice.

"Oh. Yes. Sorry. That's me." Dathan smiled charmingly. His smile that had been easing him through sticky situations for years was suddenly ineffective.

"Your card is upside down. Correct it, please. Now."

"How rude," Dathan mumbled under his breath as he flipped his card right side up. He tilted his head towards number "2" at his left. "Cranky old fellow, don't you think? This is what comes from working for a living, I say."

Number "2" ignored him completely while staring straight ahead.

"Good talk." Dathan straightened up just as the warder snapped at him once more.

"Silence, Number Three. No talking in the line. Eyes forward."

Dathan tried not to roll his eyes as he fixed them forward. The warder held a control box in his hands, connected by a long grey tube attached to the floor. He depressed a button on the box and a set of curtains began to slowly draw open, revealing a long mirror built into the wall.

Dathan's first look was at himself. Hair in place, suit still pressed and looking fine. He then stole glances at the reflection of the others.

Number '2' was almost as handsome in the face as Dathan, but slightly less developed in build. His trimmed goatee was a nice look, and Dathan made a mental note to try it out for himself sometime soon. Though he considered it might make his horse appear too much like a Billy Goat, in which case he would have to shave it immediately.

Number '1', at the end, was the opposite. A dead ringer to number two from the neck down - even dressed in dusty black denim - but the face lacked intensity. The lines were too soft, the cheekbones less defined, the eyes a tad too vacant. Besides, he sported long greasy black hair and a full scruffy beard.

I'll wager that's the perpetrator right there. Number one, Dathan thought as he leaned forward and looked to his left, curious to see the face in profile.

"I said eyes forward number three," the warder snapped. "And stand up straight."

"So sorry." It didn't cost anything to be polite and Dathan resumed the position.

To his right were '4' and '5'. They were the twins, more or less identical, and each looked bored as shit to be there. Dathan got the feeling that their appearance in the police lineup was the first time for them. *Not a terrible way to make a living, provided the criminals of the city stuck to the same look,* he thought.

Dathan's mind wandered and he began to imagine a threesome with the boys, if for no other reason than to pass the time. Once more, he forgot himself and turned his head to his right to steal a glance at the sweet spot between their chaps. The mirror didn't allow for a three dimensional viewing of bulges.

"Eyes forward, number three."

The warder was clearly a humorless man with no spark of romance in him at all, Dathan decided. “Awfully sorry, old friend.” He focused on the mirror. But he knew it wasn’t really a mirror at all. Not entirely.

His mirrors at home had a coating of silver behind the glass, allowing the light to reflect instead of passing through. The mirror he was looking at had about half the amount of silver. The rest was done by a trick of lighting. Which was why the room Dathan was in was so bright, much to the discomfort of the vampiric twins, and the room on the other side of the glass would be kept dark as night. Anyone standing in the other room would be afforded a glimpse through the glass because of the intense lighting he was standing under.

Dathan realized that he had no idea who was coming to view them or what the crime in question actually was. The complainant was someone rich, he knew that much. A friend of his uncle’s. That narrowed the list of possible clients down to about two hundred possible candidates, give or take a few dozen.

But the crime was a real mystery. *Murder. Robbery. A spot of flashing?* If it was the latter, Dathan mused, then perhaps it would be more effective for them all to stand in their birthday suits as the wronged party viewed the line. It would sure as hell make the morning more interesting.

He was about to suggest it to the loveless guard when the warder gave one more order.

“Stay facing forward. Don’t speak. Don’t move until I say so. If you do, you will be placed under arrest for obstruction of the law.”

Dathan focused his eyes on the mirror. The wounded party was about to walk into their dark room and quietly whisper a number from one to five. One of the men standing in the brightly lit room was about to have his life changed forever.

Dathan had no idea that it would be him.

Chapter Five

According to the chimes from the grand clock in the city square, it was precisely eight o'clock when Billy walked into the downtown police precinct. He had to catch an early morning train and watched as the pink sunrise decorated the sky. The city wasn't half as ugly to him when it was presented in a blurry silhouette.

He was still trying to wrap his head around the fact that the family that built that clock and the intricate rail system that ran above and below the ground was the same that he was about to start working for.

"I hope I'm not making a terrible mistake," he whispered to himself.

He tried to step lightly as he walked into the precinct, but his boots echoed far too loudly on the imported marble tiles. He took a seat and waited.

Searchers were never popular with local law enforcement, since they typically completed jobs that the boys in blue were unable to manage. It made the police look bad and Billy was well aware of the resentment that places like the one he was in held towards people like him.

He'd been in the city precinct more than a few times, but it was never in the same place twice. Upgrades were never ending. As soon as a new piece of technology or 'brilliant' invention was announced, the Commissioner needed to have it implemented immediately. Not surprisingly, the sharpest minds and greatest inventors worked round the clock to come up with the next best thing, knowing that the public purse would pay handsomely for it.

The high wall behind the counter seemed to go on forever and the latest convenience was on full display. An intricate pattern of large pneumatic tubes had been recently installed. The network of clear arteries sent documents, orders, and evidence back and forth between departments on higher floors and deep below the ground. They operated silently until one of the little

doors was opened then the sound of air sucking at full force filled the cavernous foyer.

An officer passing through the reception recognized Billy and stopped to say hello. He was probably the only one in the entire building who didn't hate Billy's guts.

"Hello, handsome. Aren't you a sight for sore eyes!"

Billy knew him but could never remember his name.

"Howdy..."

"Steve."

"Right. Steve. Nice to see you again."

Billy reckoned that Steve Turner had harbored a crush for him ever since he moved to the area from the south five years ago. The deputy station chief was married to a fruit seller and entirely devoted to his husband, but that didn't stop him from flirting with every handsome outlaw who passed through the precinct doors.

It was warm outside, but inside the air was cooled and conditioned by a series of fans suspended from the ceiling. Another modern invention.

Billy knew the shape of the deputy chief's body after a mutual frisking that took place in this very spot some years ago. In another time, another place, under a different name, he might have settled down with someone like Turner. The lawman ticked many of Billy's boxes for a partner. Except for being a lawman.

A long, sardonic whistle pierced the air as Station Chief Franklin Tate came in from the back. The sound made Billy's teeth stand on edge.

"I could have sworn I woke up today and it was a hot August Monday. Now I see that it must be Christmas morning! Blind Billy Hipp sitting in my office. Will wonders never cease?"

"Chief." Billy's short nod and mumbled title were all he was going to offer.

“Don’t tell me you saw the light through your blindness and decided to turn yourself in?”

“Partial blindness,” Billy corrected as he leaned back in his chair.

“Whatever. Cuff the bastard, Turner, before he slips out through a rat hole in the floor.”

“Yes sir, Chief.” Stephen reached for the handcuffs attached to his belt. “Err...” the deputy stopped suddenly as his brain caught up with his body. “What was the charge again?”

“A lifetime of running afoul of the law. Searchers and police officers are in the same business, Stephen, save for one vital difference. We work within the boundaries of the law. Now I don’t oppose the idea of healthy competition. As a matter of fact, this land was built on that very concept, and it’s the greatest place on earth. But I certainly won’t stand idly by while this outlier sits comfortably in my precinct like he’s as innocent as a newborn lamb. Cuff him.”

At that moment the heavy door hissed open and in walked Oliver Wendell.

“Good morning gentlemen.” Wendell sized up the situation with efficient attention. Turner was about to approach Hipp with handcuffs at the ready, and Station Chief Tate looked as cocky and satisfied as if he had just snared a rattlesnake with a pitchfork. “Are we ready for the identity parade?”

“We are, Mr. Wendell.” Tate hooked his thumbs into the tight fitting belt at either hip as a prodigious roll of fat spilled over the seam of his pants. “Just need to take out the trash first. Before the rats come sniffing.”

“I’m afraid I don’t...”

Billy clarified things for Oliver. “He’s fixing to arrest me for the crime of doing my job.”

“Arrest him?” Oliver snapped his eyes to the station chief. “Mr. Hipp is here on my invitation. I’ve contracted him to recover my stolen property, and he’s graciously agreed to help

me identify the suspect this morning. To have him treated this way displays atrocious manners.”

“That man is a known felon.” Tate stood firm.

“Have you a warrant for his arrest?” Wendell enquired.

Billy observed the handsome deputy chief lower the cuffs to his side.

“Not a standing one,” Tate replied. “Yet. But the day is young, Mr. Wendell. Younger than yourself even. I’ll be sure to have the appropriate paperwork readied by lunch time.”

“Well until then, Mr. Hipp is a citizen of this city, free to come and go as he pleases.”

Tate squinted sideways at Wendell. “With all due respect, Mr. Wendell, are you a lawyer?”

“I am not.”

“Figured as much.”

“But I know the law, not to mention the Police Commissioner. Your superior. You may have sufficient paperwork by lunchtime, but I’ll have your badge by half past ten.”

Station Chief Tate cleared his throat, then gave a dismissive nod to his deputy. Turner returned the cuffs to his belt and stepped back.

“Now.” Oliver paused for effect. “Shall we proceed to the parade like gentlemen?”

Tate stepped to one side and opened his arm in a gesture of direction. “Right this way, Mr. Wendell.” As Oliver and Billy walked past him towards the viewing area, Tate mumbled under his breath. “A half-blind Searcher come to eyeball a suspect. I never heard of anything so ridiculous.”

“How about a deaf and dumb station chief getting ordered around by a filthy-rich kid?” Billy hissed back.

Oliver walked towards the back and Billy followed behind him. They crossed through the door’s threshold into the

viewing room.

“Let’s get this over with,” Billy mumbled to himself as the door closed behind him.

The darkness of the room was slowly illuminated as the mechanical curtains began to part and open. A thin line of sunlight grew larger and larger as the luminous room on the other side of the glass came into view.

Billy’s knees suddenly turned to jelly. It was as if the hard marble upon which he stood had been ripped out from beneath him, and he was suspended in midair. His breath suddenly ceased to work as his heart pumped in triple time to send blood to his cock, which twitched and swelled with a knowing that had yet to register in Billy’s brain.

Five similar looking men, identical in their blurriness, stood holding white cards with what Billy assumed was numbers written on them.

“Can they see us?” Billy found himself asking in a breathless attempt at speech.

“Not at all, Mr. Hipp,” deputy Turner replied. Billy swallowed hard in an attempt to send some moisture down the dry gully of his throat. Heat radiated out of his chest, and filled him with an elation that he’d never felt before.

“The other side of this window is reflective for them,” the deputy continued with his answer. “As far as they can tell, they’re only looking at themselves in a mirror.”

“I know the feeling,” Billy whispered, drawing confused looks from both Wendell and deputy Turner. But confused looks were nothing compared to the delicious confusion raging in his heart and other vital organs.

Looking at the collection of tall, dark forms on the other side of the glass, Billy felt like he was staring deeply at himself. Or rather the other half of himself that he didn’t even know was missing until that very moment.

Chapter Six

Dathan was transfixed by something on the other side of the mirror.

The second the curtains started to open on the other side, he felt every sense in his body shift into high alert. Adrenalin was being pumped like the floodgates had suddenly been opened up, and he was instantly in a state of flight or fight. His heart sped up, the palms of his hands moistened, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood to attention. He could feel his ears stiffen and his lower back tighten up. When the thought finally caught up and registered in his brain, he instinctively turned his eyes away from the glass.

It was a survival instinct he knew as a non-predatory animal. In the presence of a threat, beasts such as his focused not on the danger but on a clear path away from it. Dathan's body wanted to run, but he knew better than to bolt away under the circumstances. Besides, though his animal was ready to bust out of there, the human side of him, the man, was screaming to go deeper in. To jump through the glass and lock his lips to whomever was on the other side.

The mixed signals caused his feet to shuffle quickly, and he bumped number two as he righted himself.

“Steady there number three.”

As his throat constricted, he felt the long muscle of his dick begin to throb and pulse, rising up against the two coins hanging there. That was not part of his regular threat alert system.

What in the world is going on here?

“Eyes forward, number three.”

It wasn't a snake in the grass or predator lurking in the trees that was activating his horse sense. And it wasn't his usual fight or flight reaction either. His body was formulating a third option, and it too began with the letter 'F'.

Dathan felt spooked in every way he knew from his horse state, with the added sensation of wanting to mount something and commence humping. But humping what? Who?

He forced his eyes back to the glass and stared intensely at his own reflection. Without being able to see him, or smell him, or hear him, Dathan still sensed him standing there all the same, and imagined him staring deeply through the magic window right back at him.

It was his other self. His other... half.

Could that be possible? The baffling bit of information had no connection to anything in Dathan's experience. He'd been with men before. Women, too. But he'd never felt anything quite like the sensations flooding his body as he tried to stand still. It was as if his balls were going to explode and his heart would burst. If his other half, his fated mate, was behind the glass, Dathan could not say for sure if it was man, woman, or beast.

Whoever said 'Love is blind' sure as shit didn't have this situation in mind!

Dathan needed to get into the next room right away before the unidentified source of his disrupted world got away. He quickly scanned the brightly lit room in which he stood. The high windows were good for letting in the light, but there was no door to the room behind the mirror. Indeed, the only way out was through the door he'd come in from some moments before. The precinct was a large edifice, built out of steel and stone. There would be no easy route to the front entrances from where he stood. Not to mention the fact that he was in a police station. Complete with police officers armed with guns, around every corner.

Of course there's no easy way to get from here to there, he thought grimly. He would have laughed at his own simple-minded stupidity had he not been so overcome with desperation to charge the mirror.

Dathan took a deep breath. He could simply set down his card, reveal to the warder that he was in fact the nephew of the

Police Commissioner, only in the line as a favor to his uncle, and would very much like to see who was on the other side of the glass. If it wasn't too much trouble.

Right! Good luck with that approach.

He was beginning to feel slightly dizzy.

His mind kicked into a gallop, and he tried to imagine another solution.

I'll confess to the crime! It could work. Dathan could throw his hands up in the air and scream, "I did it. It was me. Take me now!" Which seemed like a good idea until he reminded himself that he had no idea what the crime was, or what it was he might have done, which would make it virtually impossible to convince anyone of his guilt in the mysterious matter. Besides, that wouldn't exactly get him any closer to the invisible observer in the other room.

Damn it all!

There was nothing to be done other than wait out the ridiculous charade he was going through and then set about finding the one who was stirring up such chaos for him.

But how? How can I find what I didn't even know I was looking for?

A Searcher. Of course. That was what Dathan needed. The services of a Searcher.

As soon as he was allowed out, he would make some enquiries and source the absolute best in the business. No expense would be spared. Time would be of the essence. But Dathan would find the other half of his soul. He was confident on that at least.

Chapter Seven

“You okay? We’re all done here.”

Billy hadn’t taken his eyes off the figures beyond the glass for the entire three minutes of the viewing. He noticed how the middle one had looked away once. His heart wondered if it was for similar reasons as Billy was feeling, but he knew it was impossible. If the suspects could see into the viewing room, even in the slightest possible way, then the entire enterprise would be worthless, and it wouldn’t exist.

“Do you see your man there?” Billy asked, hoping that the same question wouldn’t be directed back at him. There would be no way for him to keep from blushing and sputtering like a love-sick schoolboy.

“Afraid not,” Oliver Wendell said as he turned his attention to the deputy station chief. “He’s not here. Not even close.”

Turner depressed the button on his control box, and the curtains began to close. Billy remained focused on the blurred form in the middle as the other four bodies slipped out of sight.

Although relieved to know that number three was among the innocent, Billy had half hoped that the mysterious dark stranger would have been fingered as the culprit. At least then the fellow would be held in custody and sent up for trial. Based on the few minutes Billy had drunk in his featureless beauty, he was prepared to wait out whatever sentence was destined to befall him.

“Did you see anything interesting in any of the men, Mr. Hipp? Something I might have missed, perhaps?”

Oliver’s question caught Billy off guard, and he had to work very hard not to trip over his own words as he responded.

“Naw,” he said, grateful he didn’t have to lie. “They all looked exactly the same to me.”

As the two men were led out of the viewing room and back into the main foyer of the precinct, Billy tried to reacquaint

himself with walking steadily. He felt as if he'd just been run over by a runaway locomotive. His heart was racing, his breath was constricted, and his pecker was still standing at full attention.

“Are you alright?” Oliver left his conversation with deputy Turner and ambled over to Billy, laying his hand on Billy's shoulder. “My good man, you look as if you've seen a ghost.”

Billy gently shrugged Wendell's hand off his back. This boy was getting familiar again and Billy didn't appreciate being pawed like that.

“I'm good.” Billy tilted his lower back down in an attempt to withdraw his prominent erection. The last thing he needed was to send the wrong message to Oliver. “Must have been something I ate.”

Station Chief Tate made his way over after hearing the results of the parade from Turner.

“You're certain not a single one of them looked familiar?” He was asking Oliver, ignoring Billy entirely. “We followed your description as closely as possible and came up with five outstanding candidates.”

Oliver turned back and dismissed the station chief with a wave of his hand. “I'm telling you he wasn't there. Your line-up was a total bust. None of them were who I was looking for.”

Billy bent over to catch his breath and try to lull his hard-on back to sleep.

“Give me a couple of days,” Tate offered, “and I'll round up a new parade for you. Even if I have to go across county lines to find them.”

Billy heard Oliver snort his derision. “Don't bother, Chief. I'll be relying solely on the private sector to make up for your tax-funded incompetence. Good day.”

Oliver stepped outside. Billy was about to follow, when Tate stood in his way.

“You caught something in there, didn’t you? Turner said you couldn’t take your blind peepers off the window.”

“Partially blind.”

“Whatever. Sightless or not, one of them caught your eye.”

“They were all beautiful and blurry, if that’s what you’re asking. Tall, dark, and mysterious. Maybe you’re just jealous because you missed the peepshow?”

“Something rattled your cage in there, Blind Billy Hipp, and I can tell that you haven’t said a single word about it to your... client.” Tate infused the word with a deadly dose of derision.

“I believe you’re in my way... Chief.” Billy replied with an equal tone of his own.

Tate stepped aside as Billy made his way to the door. “I’ll be watching you, Hipp.”

“Enjoy the show.” Billy mumbled under his breath as he stepped out into the bright light of the morning sun. Wendell was standing by what looked like a custom made three-wheel trap.

“Well that was a big fat bust,” Oliver announced. “Sorry I wasted your time.”

“You’re hardly wasting my time when you’re paying handsomely for it.” Billy ran his hand along the side of the trap towards the front. He was eager to touch the horses harnessed to it, hoping to reconnect with an animal to help process the beastly nature of what he was feeling. He stumbled as his hand slid off the cart to nothing.

“Looks like someone made off with your horse again.” Billy took in the air as he spoke, but could neither smell nor hear anything resembling a horse.

“No sir, Mr. Hipp. This here vehicle requires neither horse nor mule nor any such beast of burden to put it in motion. Moves entirely on its own. I call it Steel Trap.”

“Uh-huh.” Billy’s mind was already somewhere else, on someone else, and he didn’t want the beautiful suspect to get too far away.

“There’s a large metal casing underneath here where the axle is. It’s powered by a series of springs and motors. It’s a bit complicated to explain how it works, especially to a layman.”

“I didn’t ask.”

Oliver continued nevertheless. “Not terribly fast, mind you, but incredibly efficient. Gives one time to contemplate the street scene along the way.”

Billy nodded and began to walk toward the train station.

“There’s room for two if you want to hop in. We can discuss details along the way.”

“Along the way to where?”

“The Wendell estate and laboratory. Wouldn’t you like to investigate the scene of the crime? You know, for clues and such? Now that we don’t have a suspect to follow, it’s back to the drawing board, as it were.”

Billy half turned back. “Did you know any of those fellows in that line-up at all? Had you seen any one of them before?”

Billy kept his attention focused on Oliver, waiting for the answer. He had an excellent nose for dishonesty, and would know immediately if Wendell was lying or not.

“I have not seen a single one of those men before in my life. Nor do I know their names.”

Oliver was telling the truth. *More’s the pity.*

“But I could find out for you, if you think it would be helpful.”

“I can find out myself,” Billy said, turning back to the direction of the train station. “That’s what you’re paying me for, remember? To search and find.”

“Ah, well... *c’est la vie,*” Wendell remarked again with that pretentious French saying that Billy was starting to hate with a

passion. "... *c'est la vie*. So I'll just meet you there, then? At the estate?"

Billy nodded and kept walking.

"You know where it is, I trust?" Oliver called after him.

"Said I'd meet you there. And I will." Billy replied over his shoulder without turning back. "I'm just not overly specific as to when I'll meet you there," he quietly added to himself. He had someone special to find first.

Chapter Eight

Dathan rushed home after his release from the precinct. It was all he could do to stop himself from shifting into his horse and flying home. He was proud of the restraint he showed.

Sanders, as always, awaited him at the entrance to his building.

“I need to engage the services of a Searcher. Do you know any, Sanders?”

The old butler nodded once. “I do indeed, Master Dathan. A number of them. However, not all Searchers are born equally, nor do they specialize in the same way. If you can shed some light on what it is you’re hoping to find, I can narrow down my recommendations.”

Dathan considered how much to share. All he was interested in was finding the best Searcher in the least amount of time, and he was prepared to throw substantial money at that person until his problem was solved.

“I need to find an individual. I don’t know the name, or whether it is a man, or woman, or beast. But I must find out who it is immediately, or I dare say my world may crumble down in a heap of ashes. I just want the fastest and the smartest Searcher around. In short, I want the best there is working for me.”

Sanders nodded once more. “Understood sir. I’ll make some enquiries while you lunch.”

Dathan walked past the lift and raced up the stairs, scaling them three at a time. He had some energy to burn off and for now, the stairs would have to do.

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It was a long three hours before Sanders knocked on his door.

“I trust you have some suggestions for me already?”

“I do, sir. And then some. May I?”

Dathan stepped aside and allowed his servant a rare entrance into the private world of his apartment. He tried to see it through Sanders' eyes. Spartan but expensive furnishings adorned the living room. A leather couch with a custom-built side table; a two-seater love seat with silk cushions; his telescope, of course, directed out the wrap-around window.

Sanders didn't bother to sit, and Dathan didn't bother to invite him to do so. He just wanted the information.

"The best searcher in the business, I'm told by a number of sources, goes by the name of Billy Hipp. Blind Billy Hipp to those who know him."

"Blind?" Dathan's nose wrinkled as if a rotten egg had just been cracked open. "Hardly a quality one wants in a Searcher."

"Indeed, my thoughts exactly. Which is why I conducted further research on the man. He has quite the story behind him, I'm afraid. And given the nature of the story I confess I've found it difficult to separate the truth from fiction."

Dathan sat and crossed his legs, fully prepared to hear, and decide for himself. He loved a good story and even with the urgent nature of his enquiry, he knew Sanders wouldn't tease him about something so intriguing and not follow through.

"Proceed, Sanders. Tell all."

"It should be noted that Blind Billy Hipp is only partially blind. He can see forms and shapes, and his brain has become quite adept at piecing together information from his other senses. His blindness was not a defect of birth or the result of a bad accident, but rather, it is reported, willfully imposed by another."

"Willfully imposed?" Dathan sat up right. "By whom?" *Who could impose blindness on another? Willfully or otherwise?* As far as Dathan knew nobody but the Gods to do such a thing and nobody spoke of the Gods anymore unless they were referencing some revival of a classic Greek tragedy at the theatre.

“That is unknown, sir. It could be some ancient deity, or magician, or witch doctor. In any case, our Searcher was blinded deliberately by someone - or something - else.”

“Hang on a moment, Sanders. Just how old is this Searcher?”

“No one seems to know for certain, Master Dathan. Suffice to say he goes back. Way back. He gained formidable acclaim by vanquishing a wide assortment of monsters...”

“Monsters... good grief, Sanders, this gets better and better.” Dathan couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Er, yes sir. Or grander and grander as the case may be. After Billy Hipp’s reputation was established through his various deeds and vanquishing of monsters, he was constantly invited to the homes and palaces of the most powerful rulers. Men not unlike your uncle, if I may say.”

“You may. Continue.” Dathan just wanted to know more.

“On one such occasion, this Billy - which cannot be his original name, but I failed to discern the truth around that - apparently made untoward advances on the ruler’s wife and was accused of attempted rape.”

“How deplorable. Why wasn’t he killed at once? I thought that was how they dealt with that kind of thing in the olden days.”
Hmm, maybe not so thrilling a character then.

“Indeed. He was asked to leave, of course, but ancient rules around the treatment of guests prohibited his host from taking any further action. However, a recommendation to the host’s cousin, equally powerful, was issued along with a secret message.”

“Let me guess,” Dathan clapped his hands, getting caught up in the power of a good story which Sanders told remarkably well. “The message read, ‘kill this reprobate at once since I cannot.’”

“Essentially, yes. That was the gist of it.”

“And so?”

“The daughter of his new host had already fallen in love with Mr. Hipp, and therefore her father felt he could not dispatch him as per his cousin’s request. So he sent Billy on an impossible task: to kill a beast so savage and ruthless there’d be no chance of him surviving the mission.”

Dathan laughed out loud. “In other words, the ancient rich lister passed the buck along to someone else.”

“Very good sir. I wonder if you’ve not heard the story before?”

“It’s so old, Sanders, that it’s been retold a thousand different times in a thousand different ways. But this, this is the prototype. Brilliant.”

“It is that, sir, I cannot disagree.”

“I think I’m beginning to like this Billy. He has balls for days.”

“The ancients called it hubris, but yes, one and the same thing. The difference between our times lies in the fact that while someone like yourself admires such a trait, the ancients were considerably less impressed with it.”

“So what happened?”

“I was unable to ascertain the conclusion to this saga, sir. All I know is that this Billy was punished with blindness. A form of glaucoma, I would assume, but I’ve not seen an official medical diagnosis to confirm. For millennia after his fall from grace, he wandered aimlessly from place to place, century to century. At last he woke one glorious morning, to him at least, with part of his vision restored. He’s been a Searcher ever since.”

“Huh.” Dathan sat momentarily stunned by the tale. “Quite the hefty price to pay for a skipping out on a slice of humble pie.”

Sanders nodded and cleared his throat. “Which I believe is at the root of his exorbitant fees. Other Searchers in the field charge anywhere from twenty to a hundred for their services.”

Dathan nodded slowly. “A lucrative calling for sure. How much is this Blind Billy fellow?”

“For his last job, which by the way was for a close friend and supporter of your uncle...”

“Figures.”

“... he was paid an astounding two hundred dollars. The second half of which he threatened to shoot his client over if he wouldn't pay the balance.”

“He does have some balls on him.” Dathan let fly a long whistle. “Two hundred, you say?”

“Two hundred.”

“And how much do I have in my holdings that I can access without dipping into my aunt's purse?”

“Up to five hundred, Master Dathan, but it will essentially leave you destitute until your quarterly allowance comes through.”

Dathan nodded once more and stood up from his sofa. He crossed to the window and looked out over the city. The body behind the glass at the police precinct was out there, somewhere. The very thought of finding that person tickled the back of Dathan's neck and sent a warm charge down his spine.

“Go to him, Sanders. Offer him two hundred and fifty, three if you have to, and secure his services. He's got an entire mythology behind him, so he must be doing something right. And you're sure he's the best?”

“By every account, in every direction. Mr. Billy Hipp ranks at the top.”

“Then go get him, promise him his outrageous fee, and bring him here. I will tell him all he needs to know once he's standing before me.”

“Understood, sir.”

Dathan closed the door behind his servant, trusting that Sanders' resourcefulness and loyalty would succeed. *I'll have that Searcher standing before me in no time at all – then I can*

see if he's got the balls his back story suggests. Dathan found he liked that idea.

Chapter Nine

Billy was a mess and no amount of cleaning his cabin was going to change that fact. Only once before had he felt so miserable and unsettled. Once. And that was so long ago, and for such different reasons, that he could hardly believe he was comparing the two. He wandered the world for ages in that state, and somehow knew that, until he found the figure from the line up, he would wander again in a similar fashion if something wasn't done to resolve his situation.

As soon as Billy had left Oliver's sight, walking as if toward the train station, he'd doubled back and went straight to the rear of the precinct. The door was open, so he stepped inside hoping beyond hope that the five suspects were still being held. Or at least one of them. But just one glance of the warder's face, even with Billy's limited sight, he knew he was pissing up hill to get his questions answered. *But I won't know till I ask.*

"The men here for the identity parade. Any chance I could get their names?"

The warder just snorted at him. *How eloquent.*

"Look, I was just in the viewing room with my client. I'd really appreciate knowing the identity of the men we'd been shown. In particular, the middle one – number three?"

"I don't know their names or anything about them. I just line them up, keep them quiet, and send them on their way when the job is done. Or remand them if they're successfully ID'd. Which no one was today. But then you'd know that, wouldn't you? Having been in the viewing room and all."

Billy scratched his head. "I wouldn't believe me either, I guess," he said, trying to empathize his way to what he so desperately needed. "So you can't tell me who the man was. I get it. Any chance he mentioned where he was off to once you let him go?"

"Oh yeah," the warder replied with a sudden catch to his voice. "As a matter of fact, he did."

Billy lifted his brows in anticipation.

“I do believe he said he was on his way to hell. To do some ice skating.”

Billy’s brows dropped.

“Because Hell would have to be entirely frozen over before I divulged confidential information to the one and only Blind Billy Hipp.”

Billy sighed and nodded his head slowly. “You got me.”

“Now I’d be well within my rights to arrest you for unlawful trespassing here, and I’m sure Chief Tate would be pleased as a pig if I did that. But I’m about to take a coffee break and can’t be bothered with the paperwork right now. Get yourself gone and I’ll forget I saw you. But ask one more question I can’t answer, and I’ll slap cuffs on you so fast you won’t know what hit you.”

Billy’s eyebrow started to lift in mockery, but he reined it in and took his leave.

A quick circle of a three block radius did reveal the discovery of two tall, dark, handsome figures arguing in a back alley. Their size and general look fit Billy’s search criteria, so he wandered closer to listen in on their conversation, staying alert to any arousal of the feelings he experienced earlier.

“I ain’t puttin’ my share in the bank, Jack” said one, “so hand it over.”

“You’ll blow it on whores and whiskey,” brother Jack replied, “like you did the last time we stood in a line up.”

“So what? You got bigger plans for it?”

Assured now that they were part of the line-up, Billy walked towards them and smiled his best salesman’s grin. “Forgive me for intruding on your privacy, but I just have to ask: what is that cologne you’re wearing? It’s simply driving me mad.”

The first brother, the one bucking for a quick lay and bottle of bourbon, sniffed his armpit. “We ain’t wearing no cologne,

stranger, but nice of you to comment all the same.”

“Are you sure? I’ve a got a pretty sensitive sniffer here,” Billy said, laying his finger against his nose, “and I never mistake a scent.”

“Told ya’, George,” the second brother said. “You were rubbing shoulders with that fancy feller in the lineup. His high class *eau de toilette* must have rubbed off on your low class stink.”

“His what?” George replied.

“It’s French,” Billy said, “for toilet water.”

“Toilet water?” George repeated, clearly baffled by the connection. “What in the hell is high class about that?”

Billy took in the faint scent a bit longer, and did his best to stamp it into his memory banks. “Thank-you kindly, number five.” He said, tipping his hat to Jack.

“Number five...? What’d you say?”

They’re clueless, they really are. Billy turned to leave but he couldn’t help but add, “Save fifty percent of your earnings, invest twenty-five and spend twenty-five. That’s what I do, number four. It’s good business practice.”

He walked away, leaving the two brothers to their dispute. He’d done his good deed for the day.

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Billy spent the journey back home trying to focus his thoughts on how best to proceed. His only clue was that his mystery man was wealthy and had exquisite taste in cologne. Such qualities only increased Billy’s longing. No one said the Searcher’s life was an easy one.

He was still weighing up his options in the late afternoon when there was a knock at the door of his cabin.

“Mr. Billy Hipp?”

The voice betrayed an older man, refined, and highly educated. Billy sensed he was a messenger or servant of some kind, but one extremely well turned out. Not a typical figure to show up at his door on a Monday afternoon. The day was rapidly moving from strange to stranger.

“What can I do for you?” Billy had barely stood, and a well-dressed man was standing framed in his door frame.

“Are you Blind Billy Hipp, the renowned Searcher?”

“I am.”

“Then I kindly request your presence on behalf of my employer, Master Dathan. He wishes to engage your services at once.”

Billy shook his head in disbelief. “I am popular all of a sudden. Sorry, pops, but...”

“The name is Sanders, sir.”

“Sorry, Sanders, but you’ll have to tell your boss that I’m unavailable at the moment. Maybe in a week or two we can arrange a formal introduction, but for now...”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, sir. Master Dathan requires your services immediately, and is willing to pay in excess of your standard fee.”

“Again, I’d love to help, but I’m afraid he’ll have to wait. Now, if you don’t mind, I...”

“Two hundred and fifty dollars, Mr. Hipp.”

“Like I said, I’m not...”

“Three hundred.”

Billy sighed heavily. “Look, I’m really tied up with...”

“Four.”

“You don’t understand...”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve been authorized to remain here until we reach an agreement. Five hundred.”

Billy ran his fingers through his hair as he sat down at his crudely cut pine table. “Look. Sanders, is it? Right. I’m not holding out for more money. In fact, my current client is already paying me twice that amount, if I can be entirely candid about something like that. So you see? It’s not about the fee. There’s just not enough hours in the day for me to find whatever it is your master is looking for. Why doesn’t he go to the police?”

“He has family in the police force, and rather high up at that. I assure you that if he thought the police would be able to help him, he’d have half the city’s finest at his beck and call.”

Okay, that was intriguing. There weren’t many people in town with that kind of pull. Such connections would come in handy at some point, and it could be a client whose trust would be worth winning. “He sounds like a powerful fellow. What’s gone missing that he so desperately needs to hire a Searcher right away?”

“I am not at liberty to say,” Sanders replied. “That is between my master and yourself, once you accept his invitation to meet.”

“Fine. Next week. I’ll meet with him, but cannot promise that...”

“I’m afraid that’s too far away in time, Mr. Hipp. Master Dathan would like to meet with you tonight.”

“Tonight?” Billy laughed out loud. “He’s got a set of balls on him, your man, I’ll give him that.”

“He said the very same thing about you, sir.”

Billy suddenly stopped laughing and tilted his head at a curious angle. “Me? He knows nothing about me.”

“On the contrary, my good man. He knows quite a bit about you. Your entire story in fact. At least the parts of it I was able to scrape together on short notice. I’m sure with a little more digging, we’d find out everything. Like why you regained partial vision after wandering blind for so many centuries.”

Billy felt his mouth go dry. He turned his head to get a better look at the shape of the face standing in his door.

“You do have that in common, sir. Master Dathan himself suffers from similar bouts of excessive hubris.”

Billy eyed the butler with equal parts suspicion and admiration. Not many knew his story, and he preferred it that way. Now he was curious. Knowing the night would drag on if he didn't agree to meet with this Dathan fellow soon, he put his final offer on the table.

“Tomorrow morning. Jonas Beach. Sunrise. Tell your employer that I'll meet him at the old dock there. I promise to hear him out, but cannot promise I'll take on his request. That's the best I can do, Sanders. Take it or leave it.”

“Consider it taken, sir. Good day.”

And with that, the distinguished servant turned and walked off the porch, along the long path to the road, and climbed into a well-equipped carriage that was there waiting for him, leaving Billy more confused than ever.

Chapter Ten

Dathan couldn't sleep.

After waiting around all afternoon and into the evening for Sanders to return, the news of the delayed appointment landed with a sad, and rather anticlimactic thud.

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, Master Dathan. It was all he was willing to concede to."

Dathan was familiar with Jonas Beach. He'd often run there in the pre-dawn hours, far from the eyes of curious onlookers. He would have much preferred to meet that very night and rest peacefully with the assurance that the job was underway, but clearly it wasn't to be. He went to bed early in the hopes of being fully refreshed come dawn, but found himself staring at the mechanical wind-up clock that ticked noisily from its place on the fireplace mantle.

Giving up, he got out of bed, dressed, and headed out of his apartment. The night air was warm and full of so many scents. As he walked the streets, Dathan consciously tried to look every passing stranger in the eye. As the theaters and restaurants were just discharging their clientele out the doors, there was ample foot traffic to negotiate along every boulevard.

Making eye contact with strangers in the night usually communicated one thing and one thing only. Dathan knew he was attractive, and quickly found that his attempts to suss out the impossible presence of one specific person was met with assumed attempts to cruise and pick up any number of strangers.

What are the chances of encountering the person from earlier? Slim to nothing, and Dathan knew it. With no idea of what his other half looked like, he was relying solely on emotional triggers and animal instinct to navigate his search. He knew what he felt earlier that morning was unique and unmistakable, but he wasn't entirely sure if seeing more of the person would trigger the same sensations again.

There was no shortage of handsome faces and enticing bodies wandering the streets. Many of them were clad in the fashion of the day: black leather chaps and shirtless vests; silk top hats and tails with brass chains strung from buttonhole to pocket; slim glistening knee-high boots with raised heels and pointed toes; long gloves and silky cravats, brass buttons and steel clips, outrageous piercings, and elaborately tattooed skin. Everything was on display in the shadows afforded by the night air.

Shifters mixed happily with men. Dathan walked among upright wolves and ferociously sexy cats, and each creature eyed him up and down the way he did them. Strangers approached after a few swapped glances and propositioned him in both direct and indirect ways. From “Have you got a light?” to “Your place or mine?” and everything in between.

It didn't take Dathan long to realize he had been sending the wrong message to the wrong people and that could cause him trouble he wasn't looking for. Slipping off the streets, he stepped into the wider expanse of the huge park in the center of the city. There, under cover of the shadows offered by some trees, he set himself up to shift.

Dathan relished the shedding of his clothes and savored those first few seconds of naked freedom. There was something wild and faintly decadent about nakedness in the great outdoors. But, before he could be spotted and propositioned again, he let his shift come over him, becoming a wild horse, which was not an entirely uncommon sight within the boundaries of the city. It always made his heart soar as he set off at a gallop across the greenery.

Sometime later, he came to rest beside the tranquil stillness of the park's lake. It had been man-made at great expense some ten years before. An entire steam powered excavation and conveyor system had been designed and implemented to haul out the swampy earth and redirect a natural stream to supply the lake with sufficient water.

The brightly lit moon showed his reflection. A beautiful dark stallion looked back at him, with Dathan's dark searching eyes floating on the water's surface. It was the second time he had stared hard at his own reflection that day, and he longed to feel what he felt the first time.

And then suddenly he did.

Impossible. He huffed, making his much thicker shifted lips flutter. The sensation wasn't as intense as before. It was really just a tickle, the slightest flutter, but it started the exact same chain reaction inside him. Dathan wanted to stay and run, hide away and be fully seen, all at once.

Maybe I'm in love with myself? He was only joking to himself, but in a way it made sense. After all, he only felt the confusion and emotional explosion when staring directly at himself – first in his human form and then in his animal shape.

Then a sound cut through his moment of self-love, and Dathan's head shot up while his ears stiffened. A rock had been thrown in the water, skipping across the surface from the other side. Dathan looked towards the spot from where it had been thrown.

There, on the other side of the lake, a sole individual was absentmindedly skipping stones, his buckskin jacket taut with muscled arms launching rock after rock across the water.

Chapter Eleven

Billy couldn't sleep.

After the butler had left, he immediately regretted his agreement to meet with Sanders' employer. He was exhausted from the day, and stretched so tight he was afraid he might just snap in half.

The morning in the police precinct still sat heavily upon him, and no matter what position he took in his small creaky bed, he couldn't get comfortable enough to allow sleep to take over. The haunting smell of cologne mixed with the fuzzy image of the man in the middle - not to mention the annoying banter from Station Chief Tate - was recipe enough for insomnia. Billy rolled out of bed before night had fully fallen, pulled on his most comfortable boots and favorite buckskin jacket, and walked the few miles towards the general store and railway station.

It was too late to catch a train into the city, so he sprang for a private carriage ride at great expense. He got off on the upper side near the park, where the well-to-do mostly inhabited, and began to wander the streets. He was far too smart to expect or even hope for a chance encounter with the man in the middle, but it sure as hell beat tossing and turning in a lonely bed. He also knew it would be the last chance he would have to explore his possibilities. Once he'd met and dismissed his sunrise appointment, he would have to focus his time and efforts on the job at hand: finding Wendell's horse and the thief who stole it.

Work was hard enough at the best of times. To get it done while distracted by matters of the heart, and do it well required a major effort. Billy was no stranger to putting in effort when it was needed, and he was more than capable of boxing up his feelings when necessary. With those thoughts in mind he set himself up to wander and wallow the night away, all night if that's what his heart wanted, and then he'd show up as promised on the eastern seashore come dawn.

He had no intention of taking the Dathan's case. What kind of a name was that anyway? Master Dathan? He'd never heard the like. But ah, the rich were a breed unto themselves.

Nighttime was never good for Billy's surveillance efforts. His limited vision was further reduced with the loss of daylight. Luckily the sky was clear of clouds and the full moon was bouncing ample light across any shiny surface. And there was a lot of those in the city.

He slipped in and out of restaurants, clubs, and theatre lobbies, keeping his senses peeled for the right smells and blurry sights. He encountered plenty of tall, dark, handsome men who inhabited the same out-of-focus description as the one that morning, but none wore the right cologne. He did come across the odd whiff of the tell-tale scent, and eagerly searched for the accompanying form. It happened three times: the first led to a short, stout grandfather; the second to a blond beanpole of a bloke; the third to a handsome enough banker or accountant, but with a receding hairline and pudgy middle. Not his number three.

When an uppity Maître d' snidely offered to replace Billy's buckskin coat with a proper dinner jacket, he knew it was time to leave off the search.

Feeling despondent, and fighting the feeling that he was on the brink of sinking back into a thousand-year depression, Billy wandered into the park. He avoided the hidden away pockets where the shifters gathered, but he could hear their howls of pleasure on the soft warm breeze. Most people would think that the park was no place to wander alone after dark, but that was of no concern to Blind Billy Hipp. His sidearm was loaded and his reflexes were sharp, despite his heart feeling like a great big pile of mud.

Letting his senses guide him, Billy wandered the paths and trails inside the park for hours and never encountered a soul. He arrived at the lake. It was as calm and still as giant sheet of glass – clear enough for him to see his own blurred reflection for a moment.

“You sure are a dumb old bastard, Billy Hipp,” he muttered, and he kicked at the stones along the lake’s shore. His boot unearthed a perfectly flat stone disc, ideal for skipping. He couldn’t resist the urge to see how far he could get it across the lake.

He bent his knees, wound his arm back, and side armed it with great force. He was able to hear the number of skips far better than he could ever see them.

One, two, three...

He tried again with another rock.

One, two, three, four...

Getting better.

One, two, three, four, five...

After the fifth sound of a rock dipping its toe into the lake, Billy’s attention was distracted by someone approaching him from further up the path. He stopped his throwing until the figure passed him by.

The unmistakable scent of a horse coupled with the heart melting sound of its happy neigh hit Billy at the exact same moment. He looked up and saw the blurry shadow of a majestic stallion, adorned with what looked like a blanket but otherwise free of bridle and saddle, standing like an apparition before him.

Chapter Twelve

Dathan's equine heart was ready to explode. It was him! The man who stood at the edge of a moonlit lake wearing a buckskin jacket was causing all the same feelings to rise up inside his horsey self. It had to be him.

Dathan opened his mouth to address the stranger before him, but found only a joyful neigh escape his horse's lips. Shit! He couldn't very well shift back in front of his stranger, not without giving the man a heart attack. Nor did he want to dash off unexplained and risk losing him once again.

Instead Dathan nickered, and whinnied, and walked fearlessly up to the man in the buckskin jacket and nudged his chest.

"Well hello..." The man patted Dathan's face gently, but there was a firmness and experience in those hands. "My, what a beautiful creature you are. Oh yes. Yes indeed."

Dathan nudged him once more and then again, hopefully not so hard as to throw him off his feet.

"Whoa boy, easy now. You're going to push me into the lake. Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere, and I ain't gonna hurt you."

The man continued to pet him, and ran his hand up and down the blanket that kept Dathan's wings concealed.

"You're wearing a blanket but no saddle. Strange. Is your owner around? Did the two of you lose each other all of a sudden?"

The eyes of the mystery man were a deep and dreamy blue, each of them an ocean Dathan wanted to sink into... forever.

"Well you're certainly taking my mind off heavy matters tonight, old boy. Thank you for that."

Dathan stepped closer, moving his side to the man's body. *Just get on me, please! Climb up! Climb up!* He felt as if he was screaming in his head.

He felt the man lay his arms across his back, and was immediately struck by how strong they were. The man laid his head against Dathan's flank as his hand found his mane.

"Steady, boy. Steady."

Dathan felt the tug on his mane. It was not painful in the slightest. This man knew how to mount a horse. In a matter of seconds, he was bearing the weight of the rider, whose legs pressed with impressive strength against his flanks on either side.

"Take me wherever you please," the man quietly said as he leaned forward and softly caressed Dathan's neck. "I'm in no rush to be anywhere at all."

To the few onlookers they passed along the edge of the park, the sight of a horse trotting along with a saddle-free rider was no great sight. At one moment, the man would communicate with his legs easily enough, slowing Dathan down or speeding him up. A slight tug on his mane left or right indicated the direction in which to turn. The next moment, it felt as if the beast were leading the man. Such a symbiotic sharing of control was rare in these relationships, especially when they were so newly struck.

The path led out of the park, and Dathan felt the man's face hot against his neck. He was being caressed as much as he was being ridden. The feeling sent his mind and body into shivering spasms of joy.

"Easy boy. Something spooking you? Everything's okay. It's all okay."

His voice was as soothing as his manner, and Dathan relaxed even further. He circled the entire park one more time, then picked up the pace and galloped like the wind along a quiet road that led out of the city toward the eastern seaboard.

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The stars were bright and clear as the moon sunk lower and lower into the sky. The salty smell of ocean filled Dathan's sizeable nostrils, and triggered a feeling of absolute perfection

inside him. He was running free on the sand, together with the object of his desires - desires he wasn't entirely aware of a day ago - and without a worry in the world.

Except that he was a horse. And his newfound beloved was a man.

How did he feel about shifters? Dathan allowed the thought to break into his state of bliss, and felt the familiar sense of panic start to take over. He knew all too well that some found the very idea of shifting repulsive. A man's affection and love for an animal was one thing. His love for his fellow man another. But those who occupied both forms? It often cancelled love out entirely.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

The slightest shade of pink began to stain the sky. Dawn was coming. The sun would start to peek over the horizon soon, and all the perfection was about to come to an end.

Dathan slowed down to a cantor, then a trot, then a walk, and finally came to a resting stance.

"That was a glorious turn," his rider said as he slid slowly off Dathan's back. "I can't remember the last time I felt so... I don't know... at home. Truly."

The man came around to the front and pressed his forehead affectionately into Dathan's muzzle. "You're one special animal, that's for sure. I've a good mind to keep you all for myself, but there are rules about these things. No horse as calm and good natured as yourself came to it naturally. Someone broke you, trained you, and has loved you long and well. He's a lucky man. It breaks my heart to say it, but you best get back to him wherever he is."

Dathan whinnied and neighed some more, and lifted his head up and down in protest.

"I know, boy, I know. I don't want you to go either. If it were me who owned you, and I'd lost you... even for one night, well... let's just say I'd be feeling about as lonesome and aimless as I did before you found me in the park earlier."

The first sliver of the orange sun was beginning to peak out over the water. Dathan suddenly realized where he was and when. Jonas Beach! He hadn't given a moment's thought to his meeting with the Searcher. Now of course he didn't need it, having found what he was looking for all on his own. But the idea of someone else appearing there, looking for him, asking questions... he didn't need the stress. Best to run off out of sight behind the dunes, shift in private, and head to the old dock in human form.

“Pretty sunrise, wouldn't you say?” The man was gazing dreamily at the horizon. “It's going to be a beautiful day.”

One final look into those dreamy blue eyes and Dathan was off. He turned and ran with such a force that the man standing alone on the beach must have thought a snake or scorpion was scurrying through the sand at his feet.

Chapter Thirteen

Billy walked along the beach toward the old dock. His mind was peaceful for the first time in decades, and he was glad of the moment to savor the serenity.

He couldn't help but feel that he had encountered that horse before. There was something so familiar about the animal, but he couldn't say for sure what it was. Billy had never known a horse well enough, not since... well, that was an impossibly long time ago. There was no way the magnificent animal he'd met in the park would connect back that far.

And something else was bubbling up inside his loins. The feeling from the precinct was back, or had been, but in a completely new way. It was love, devotion, loyalty, compassion... all the building blocks of a life shared with someone else. Everything was there from the morning viewing session with the absence of lust. That horse, appearing out of nowhere, that seemed to know him and he it, restored his faith in the possibility of true love.

Which were strange feelings to reconcile so early in the morning. Billy looked around the beach. More people were out now taking their sunrise strolls. Some couples - men with men, men with women and even a couple of women together - while others walked alone. And why not? Billy could not remember a morning as stunning and warm as the one being promised as the sun slowly started to rise.

He arrived at the dock. There was not another soul there. Billy tilted his head towards the sky, and could see, even with his limited vision, that the sun had cleared the horizon. The day had dawned. Under normal circumstances Billy would not wait around for anyone. If someone were late for a meeting with him, well that was on them, not Billy. But after his glorious and unexpected ride on such a perfect horse, he was feeling languid and easy going. He hoisted his foot atop the bollard, leaned himself upon his bent knee, and watched the world around him come to life for another day.

Someone was walking towards the dock from the western dunes. Billy watched the grey blur get larger and larger as the figure approached. Though he couldn't be certain, it appeared as if the gentleman was wearing nothing but a gothic khaki poncho. His feet were bare, his head hatless and covered by the poncho's hood. A crisscross of leather strapping marked a noticeable 'X' on the man's chest even Billy could see. Brass buckles and clasps caught the sun's hard light, and reflected it with each determined step. Whoever it was, he wasn't out for a morning stroll. The man knew where he was headed, and approached his destination with marked determination.

Billy felt his knees weaken for the third time in less than twenty four hours. His heart sped up, his mouth went dry, and his palms turned damp. It was a similar feeling to what he felt in the park, but this time his cock joined in the fray. Just as it had done in the viewing room at the precinct.

He squinted his cloudy eyes, and was able to make out long black hair, flowing like a god, a broad chest, and powerful arms. He was tall. Dark. And if Billy's stiffening cock was any indicator, handsome as they come.

Billy stood up straight, barely able to believe his dream was walking towards him. The figure suddenly stopped as Billy stood, and looked around from east to west.

"Oh shit, don't run away," Billy whispered to himself. "Whatever you do, don't run off. Not now. Not when you're this close."

To encourage the stranger, Billy raised his hand in a friendly wave.

Chapter Fourteen

Dathan stopped dead in his tracks when he saw who was standing on the dock.

“He’s still here,” he whispered, barely able to contain his joy.

The night’s pleasures came flooding back to him, along with the feeling of being spooked at the precinct. With no window separating him from his other, and while standing on two legs instead of four, Dathan felt the full impact of standing near what could be nothing other than his fated mate.

He looked around to his left and right. The Searcher was probably here somewhere, peeking behind a grove of trees, spying with a telescope, or maybe submerged in the icy waters below the dock. Dathan had no real idea how a Searcher went about his business, so imagined he could be anywhere.

Not that he really cared. Dathan could feel his groin burning in anticipation of being with the buckskin-coated stranger, and he suddenly regretted not having a decent change of clothes on hand. Thankfully the sand was not too cold, and the morning sun felt warm against his face.

The stranger waved at him, and Dathan broke into a sprint towards the dock.

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To Billy’s delight, his beloved number three started to run towards the dock. His bare legs were well formed, and he covered the ground between them with great strides, hardly disturbing the sand as he floated across it with strength and grace.

He stepped onto the wooden jetty and slowly made his way towards Billy, the bright sun causing him to shade his eyes with one hand. When he arrived, the two just stood there grinning at one another like a pair of village idiots.

“Nice to see you again,” was the first thing Billy could think of saying. “Very nice.”

“I hoped beyond hope I would find you again,” the stranger replied, “but never dreamed it would happen so quickly.”

Billy smiled his agreement. Those were the very words he was thinking. It was like he was meeting himself in another body.

“This is going to sound corny as hell, but I feel like I’ve known you my entire life. It’s been a long one, I won’t lie, but I feel like I’ve just been born this very second.” Billy sighed deeply, suddenly nervous after saying something so out of tune with who he was. But the man in the poncho laughed and nodded.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

A horsefly landed on Billy’s shoulder, and he held his breath as he watched the man across from him lift his hand to brush it off. The feeling of his touch drove Billy’s senses wild.

“Keep your hand there,” he said, “I don’t mind.”

He felt the strong fingers squeeze and release at the top of his shoulder muscle. Such an innocent thing but it felt like lightning was striking him.

“Listen, I uh...” Billy hesitated as he caught someone walking up to the dock. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m supposed to be meeting somebody here right now.”

“Oh,” his other replied, removing his hand. Billy could hear the disappointment in his voice.

“Strictly business. It’s a long story. I’ll get it done as soon as I can and then maybe we can take a walk along the sand and get to know one another better. I have a thousand and one questions.”

“Of course, no problem,” the half-naked god replied. “Happy to wait. I’m actually meeting someone here myself, and promise to dispatch him just as quickly.”

“Meeting someone? Here?”

“Oddly enough, strictly business as well. Only I won’t be requiring his services after all. He might be miffed to have

come all this way for nothing, so I don't expect he'll be happy to see me."

"How anyone could see you and not be overcome with joy and happiness seems to me an unlikely scenario," Billy answered, then shook his head at the sentimental bullshit that was sprouting from his mouth. "Shit, listen to me. Corny as hell once again. I promise to act normal soon."

"I like corn. It's sweet."

"Yeah. All I'm saying is the fellow would have to be blind as a bat to not recognize that you're the most beautiful creature to ever grace this planet."

"Funny you should say that..."

Billy noticed a fellow who he thought was walking towards the dock strolled right on by. He looked back to the beautiful stranger before him.

"... the man I'm waiting to see is, in fact, blind. Well... he was. They say he has some partial sight back now."

Billy felt the blood drain from his face, his heart suddenly stop, and he was sure it was going to fall right out of his chest.

"You're Master Dathan?" He whispered the name with the reverence of a high priest invoking the gods.

"You're Blind Billy Hipp?"

Billy shrugged helplessly as he smiled broadly. "I'm only partially blind. I can definitely tell how handsome you are."

Each froze solid for an eternal moment as they individually pieced together the threads that led them to their meeting. Then, as if choreographed, they both started laughing as if it were impossible to stop.

"And here I thought yesterday was the strangest of days," Billy uttered before he grabbed the leather straps of Dathan's poncho and pulled him in fast for a kiss. He stopped just before their lips met to ask one more question.

"What did you want to hire me to find?" Billy asked.

“You.” Dathan leaned in for the kiss, but Billy pulled back once more.

“You were going to shell out five hundred dollars for me to find myself?”

“I would have paid five thousand. But then, I didn’t know you were you.”

“I feel the same way sometimes,” Billy said with a chuckle and leaned in for the kiss that he felt had been put on hold for far too long.

This time it was Dathan who pulled back.

“You’re not still going to charge me, are you?” Billy touched Dathan’s mouth lightly with the tips of his fingers. He thought his mate was teasing, but wanted to double-check.

“I’ll give you a twenty-five percent discount,” he said. “Satisfied?”

“Not by a long shot,” Dathan whispered, and Billy couldn’t help himself. He grabbed the long soft hair of his elusive and irresistible stranger and pulled his face into his.

The kiss they’d both been waiting for since forever felt as if it could last a thousand years and never get old.

Chapter Fifteen

As delicious as the kiss was, there was so much more Dathan wanted to taste and ask of the man in his arms. He restrained himself for the time being, settling for walking arm-in-arm towards the dunes.

The Searcher was burying his face in Dathan's chest, then suddenly pulled his head up sniffing the air.

"You smell that?" He asked.

Dathan suddenly became overly conscious of his lack of a proper outfit. "Sorry," he said. "It was a wild night. I wasn't expecting to end up here the way I did, and so find myself awfully underdressed. I'm terribly embarrassed by it all, so maybe we could make our way to my apartment in the city? I have an exquisite steel bathtub, big enough for two, with hot running water."

Billy nodded and wrapped his arm tighter around Dathan's waist. "Bathtubs are my love language," he said. "Did you ride here? I can smell horse on your poncho."

Dathan bit his lip as he contemplated telling all to what he was now convinced was his fated mate and one true love. He wouldn't exactly lie, but decided that it was not the time nor place to come entirely clean about his shifting status.

"I actually ran here."

"Ran? With nothing on your feet?"

"Ran. Walked. Ran a bit more." He could see that Billy was a bit baffled by it all. "Come. I live near the park. Let's find a carriage and get inside where we can be alone. I'll explain everything then." He could feel Billy's hesitation. "Trust me."

The Searcher nodded and kissed him on the cheek. "I've built my life and survival on not trusting anyone much at all, preferring to find things out on my own. I'm partial to finding my proof in my pudding, you might say. But with you, it's different. Don't ask me to explain it, but I do trust you."

Dathan kissed him back as they arrived at the main road to the city, where a carriage for hire awaited its first fare of the day.

After nudging the driver awake, Dathan gave his address, promising to pay double the fare upon arrival, provided the two were granted the utmost privacy along the way.

From his perch above and behind the covered carriage, the cab driver tipped his hat in discreet professionalism.

Dathan stepped aside and let Billy climb in first, then followed hotly after. Tiny brass cranks near the three windows were disconnected. The cab had the latest mechanical motors installed, and so the world was shut out with the bush of a button. The cranks turned on their own accord as the curtains lowered inside, an intricate system of cogs and wheels secretly doing all the work.

“Three cheers for innovation,” Dathan exclaimed as he tore off Billy’s buckskin jacket. “One never knows when you’ll need both hands free when riding in a covered carriage.”

The carriage jerked into motion as the two locked their lips together and let their hands wander freely. There was not enough khaki wool on Dathan’s poncho to hide his engorged cock, which stood like a tent pole beneath the fabric.

“I’m not typically a champion of all the latest gadgets and gizmos,” Billy said as he licked Dathan’s neck and chest “but I will agree with you on this one: it’s nice to have both hands free.”

Dathan yelped with pleasure when he felt both hands of the Searcher land on his cock. Billy had large hands and there was room for both plus a third along Dathan’s shaft.

Billy buried his head below the poncho’s flap just as the carriage took a sharp left turn. Dathan’s shoulders flew up against the silk cushions on the edge of the tiny compartment.

“Ahhh!” He cried out with a sudden sharp pain.

Billy poked his head up. “Is everything ok?”

“Totally fine,” Dathan answered as he rubbed his collar bone. “An old shoulder injury flares up from time to time. Don’t let it distract you. Did the sudden turn throw you as well?”

“Not at all,” Billy smirked. “I had something firm to hold on to.”

Dathan adjusted his hips once more, centering himself on the cushioned bench seat. He cried out again when he felt the heat of Billy’s mouth close over the tip of his cock. He leaned back, arching his spine, and pressed his hands firmly against the wood paneling of the fast moving carriage.

“Driver!” Dathan called out. “Circle the park once or twice before home.”

The tapping of the driver’s crop atop the carriage roof signaled that he heard and understood the request. Dathan pressed harder with his hands and heard a slight crack in the wood. He put his hands behind his head, and interlaced his fingers as Blind Billy Hipp went down on him.

He stole dizzy glances out the window as the curtain flapped in and out. The city was waking up and everyone was going about their business that Tuesday morning. Shop doors were unlocked; steam powered tanks hissed and spat as coffee machines forced hot water through freshly ground beans; gentlemen tipped their dark hats to ladies who rested black octopus parasols atop their leathered shoulders. Their lips were as red as blood and the drawn lines around their eyes black as tar. Newspaper men hawked the morning edition, yelling out the headlines to appeal to the curious and bolster sales.

“Shifters Continue To Go Missing” they called. “Read all about it.”

Everything he could see were common sights and sounds to Dathan, but he was experiencing it from a state of increasing pressure and ecstasy. The world was the same and entirely different all at once. He slid his hips down the seat a bit more and tilted his head forward to watch Billy devour him whole.

It was an impressive debut given the length and girth of his prick.

His climax was inevitable, and just a teaser for things to come. Dathan was silently impressed that Billy had swallowed his every drop, leaving no marks or drops on the upholstery or Dathan's poncho.

He must have looked utterly amazed because the first thing Billy said when he had the use of his mouth once again was "I don't mind getting messy myself, but I sure do like to keep things neat."

"Suits me just fine, Billy Hipp. Suits me just fine."

Dathan felt the carriage come to a stop. He called up to the driver. "I thought I asked you to circle the park once or twice?"

A voice, clearly trying to hide its embarrassment, squeaked back. "I did, sir. Three times. Shall I embark on a fourth?"

Dathan and Billy were both chuckling as they opened the carriage and stepped out. Sanders met them at the door of the building and dutifully paid the cabbie twice his fee after the two escaped up the lift.

Chapter Sixteen

Billy couldn't take his eyes off the brass faucets. Plural. One for hot water and one for cold. He'd never seen anything like them before.

Dathan splashed him with some bubbles which were also a novelty as far as Billy was concerned. "Where'd you go?"

"Hmm?"

"You've been staring at the plumbing for the last five minutes."

Billy sank deeper into the tub and sighed as Dathan massaged his foot.

"I just can't get my head around it. Hot water just came gushing out of that pump on the wall."

"It did."

"Don't get me wrong, but I'm mightily impressed. I love a hot bath, but it's an all-afternoon affair for me - getting the pot to boil, filling the tub, walking to the pump, and filling the pot again, waiting for it to boil again. And so on, over, and over, and over. Here, you just pump it in by turning a tap, like it was living behind the wall and you were just tapping into a keg of beer or barrel of wine."

Dathan laughed. "It is essentially that, but the barrel is a steel tank that's fed from the city waterworks system. The coils wrapped around the tank are steam powered and keep the temperature at whatever I choose it to be. I like it pretty hot, then I can mix it with the cold water that comes out of the other tap."

"Just amazing." Billy shook his head at the very idea.

"Soon every household will have something like this. Baths all day and night, whenever you please. No more labor involved. It's the future."

Billy rubbed his feet foot along Dathan's groin. "This is the future right here," he said as he pressed a bit harder.

“Mmm...”

The two luxuriated in silent soaking. Sanders had prepared a light lunch earlier and half-eaten sandwiches - crust expertly sliced off - sat neglected on a brass plate. Cold water with gassy bubbles floated up to the top of crystal drinking glasses, perched carefully on the accompanying table beside the tub.

“So, tell me, Blind Billy Hipp... how did you end up in the viewing room of an identity parade at the main police precinct at eight o'clock on a Monday morning?”

Billy filled Dathan in on the chain of events. The mysterious appearance of a client at his door, the promise of an extraordinary amount of money to find what had been stolen from him, the bullying of the Station Chief.

“May I ask who your client is?”

Billy smiled apologetically. “I make it a practice to not divulge the names of the people I work for. Suffice to say, this fellow is a well-known figure in the world of innovation and highly connected to the powerful men that run this city.”

“I entirely understand.”

“It's not that I don't trust you.”

“I know.”

“It's just that things tend to get messy quickly, and as I said before...”

“You like to keep things neat,” Dathan finished his sentence as he reached for another sandwich and a tiny, pickled gherkin. “I'm entirely the same way.”

“So, my client invited me to attend the police line-up with him.”

“And that's when you saw me.”

“I saw something fuzzy and gorgeous through the glass, yes. All five of you in the line-up looked more or less the same to me, but something... I don't know... something *divine* kept me focused on the man in the middle.”

“Man number three,” Dathan said with a wink.

“But now you’re number one to me,” Billy added, then grimaced at his remark. “I’m sorry, I swear I’ll stop sounding so damn corny soon. It’s just been a very long time since I felt this way. My brain hasn’t quite caught up to my heart.”

“I really don’t mind.” Dathan released his foot from his strong soothing hands. “Other foot?”

“Hell yes! I can handle one of yours at the same time if you like.”

There was something sensual about touching each other – intimate and yet strangely caring too – their connection strengthening with each stroke of toes and tendons.

“Forgive me for asking,” Dathan said, “but why would your client invite you to the viewing room knowing your handicap would prevent you from seeing details like facial features?”

“He was banking on the horse thief being in the line-up, and wanted me there to get the location of his stolen animal out of him.”

Billy felt Dathan’s hands go still.

“Horse thief?” Dathan asked. “I was in a police line-up for a horse thief?”

Billy heard the sudden distress in his voice. “You didn’t know?”

“I was told nothing.” The water sloshed as he appeared to get more agitated. “I was told nothing more than to show up at eight o’clock and keep my eyes forward.”

Billy swallowed as he felt Dathan’s pulse quicken just behind the ankle bone. He glanced over to their clothes which Sanders hung up on the door hooks. Dathan’s khaki poncho was there, still smelling of horsehair and stable.

“Forgive me for asking this, Dathan, but I really have to know: did you steal another man’s horse a fortnight ago?”

He heard Dathan suppress a gasp. The question shocked his mate, that much Billy did know, and it didn't make him feel any better for asking about it.

“Of course not, no. I would sooner steal a man's eyes than his horse. Not that I've committed either crime. To steal another man's horse is to disable him in the most cruel and heartless of ways. I wouldn't wish it upon my worst enemy.”

Billy thought back to his ride last night and the free use of another man's horse as his own for a few hours. “I get it, I understand. I feel the same. You just reacted in such an emotional way when I mentioned the crime.”

Dathan's face turned away for a moment, and Billy felt the disconnection immediately. It stung his heart.

“I'm sorry, Dathan. I meant no disrespect, I swear.”

“None taken, I assure you.” He turned back to Billy and sat a bit more upright in the tub. “I know every single horse within a two hundred mile radius, Billy. I would know if one had been stolen a day ago, let alone two weeks ago.”

Now it was Billy's turn to straighten up. “What are you saying?”

“I'm saying that no horse has been stolen around here in months.”

Billy quickly thought back over the exchange with Oliver at his cabin two days ago.

“He said the horse's name was Fountain. Fountain of Youth. Ring any bells?”

Dathan sucked in a loud breath. “Fountain. A magnificent creature. He lived on the Wendell estate. Oliver raised him from a colt and showered him with love and devotion. Few horses lived as well as Fountain, though all deserve to.”

“Lived?” Billy asked, emphasizing the past tense that Dathan used in describing the horse.

“Fountain died a year ago, Billy. So there’s no way someone could have stolen him away a fortnight ago. I’m afraid your client, whomever he is, has lied to you.”

Billy paused long enough to collect his thoughts. He felt sick at the idea that he might have been taken in by Wendell, but what was the reason? He’d been paid a deposit of five hundred dollars, which was a lot of money in anyone’s purse. *To find a dead horse?* Why would someone, even someone with an over-inflated bank balance like Oliver Wendell, waste good money on a fabricated theft?

“Is there any chance there’s another horse by the same name?” Billy asked. “Registered in the stud book?” He saw Dathan shake his head.

“No two horses with the same name are allowed to exist in that registry at the same time.”

Billy let his hand float to the top of the bath water, then pressed it down, then let it float up once again. The bubbles that formed from the soap catching the force of the lever-less pump had all but disappeared, and the water’s temperature had dropped somewhat.

“Getting cold?” Dathan asked. “We can get out and wrap up in some warm towels. I can have Sanders light a fire, open a bottle of wine, and put in an order for supper.”

Billy nodded, his mind still half thinking about his unusual case, but Dathan stood at the same time he did, and Billy had to go in for a kiss with the gorgeously naked man. When he needed his breath again, Billy massaged a towel into the hard expansive chest of his bathing partner, slowly catching every last droplet of water on the soft and silky skin. “How did you end up standing in the identity parade?” Billy asked. “You don’t strike me as the type someone like Charles Tate would choose to fill out the line?”

Dathan dried off Billy’s back as he answered. “My uncle is the Police Commissioner. He needed a favor, one more body to

stand with the other four finalists in the tall, dark, and handsome look-alike contest.”

Billy turned to him. “Sanders mentioned you had some family high up in the force. I never reckoned it went that high. Your uncle’s running for mayor, I hear?”

“I hear that too,” Dathan sighed. “Every single day. My Aunt Tottie frequently reminds me of the fact, and how I owe everything I have to the two of them.”

Billy looked back at the ornate tub with hot water on demand. The bathing room was larger than his entire cabin. “So... do you? Owe them everything?”

Dathan shrugged. “In a manner of speaking, yes. I’d have none of this splendor nor my comfortable privilege had I not been taken in by the pair of them when my parents died. I’m happy to help out when I’m asked.”

Billy stepped into the white robe Dathan held out for him, and tied it closed with a simple knot. It felt softer than a cloud. “So your family must be pretty tight with Oliver Wendell, then.”

“My uncle is, yes. Most of this city is run on Wendell innovation and technology. He was close with to the father and is now close with the son.”

Billy held out another blindingly white robe for Dathan, who put one arm through then suddenly stopped and turned to face Billy.

“He’s your client, isn’t he? Oliver Wendell... the Third.”

Billy appreciated the snobby tone with which Dathan added ‘the third.’ At least he felt the same way about that kind of thing, despite his own entitlement. Billy smiled a tight lipped grin.

“It’s ok, you didn’t tell me,” Dathan reassured him. “I figured it out. Your reputation is still sound.”

“Good to know,” Billy said as the two stood at the door of the bathroom. Dathan’s hand gripped the brass handle, but stopped short of opening it.

“He’s tight with my uncle, Billy. Not me. My family is closely connected to many people, few of which I find trustworthy or decent. I appreciate my uncle in many ways, but we couldn’t be more different from one other.”

Billy just had to kiss him again as he tried to let the tension go from his shoulders and neck. But it was hanging on with stubborn persistence. “Why would Wendell lie to me? And throw away so much money in the process? It doesn’t make sense.”

Dathan placed his hands on Billy’s shoulders. He stood about six inches taller than the Searcher, and though he was considerably younger in years - millenniums younger, in fact - Billy felt as if Dathan was the elder of the two of them in that moment. To his surprise, he found the tension in his shoulders let go under Dathan’s hands and that turned him on.

“We’ll get to the bottom of Oliver Wendell together, I promise. Try not to worry about it for the next hour or so. What I have planned for you is going to require your undivided attention.”

It would seem Billy had a clever mate. Quick to follow through on what was being promised, he slipped his hands into the opening of Dathan’s robe, and began to slide them down around his back, clutching his ass. *He’s as strong as a Clydesdale*, Billy thought.

“How do you know so much about horses, by the way?” Billy asked as he rubbed his hands up and down Dathan’s glutes.

“I promise I’ll tell you that too, in good time.”

“Complicated answer, is it?” Billy managed to ask just as Dathan brushed the head of his cock with his fingertips. It would seem his mate was fond of exploring under robes as well.

“Kinda. I just don’t want to mess up this moment right now.”

“Right,” Billy sighed. “You like to keep things clean.”

“Some things,” Dathan replied as he wrapped his fingers around Billy’s shaft. “But with other, more intimate matters,

I'd be more than willing to compromise.”

Billy couldn't escape the moan that fell from his lips. Dathan's grip was firm, but his soft skin emanated a heat of such magnitude Billy curled his toes in response. As Dathan leaned in closer, Billy basked in his scent as it enveloped him, lost entirely in the moment. *Answers can wait*, Billy mused as Dathan's hands stroked up and down his aching length, erasing every thought from Billy's mind but one.

Dathan.

From the moment he'd laid his blurred vision on number three his life had been inexplicably changed and Billy knew in his heart of hearts that the coming acts would change him for the rest of his life. He felt ready in the core of his being, to claim and be claimed by a man he never truly believed he would have the good fortune of meeting. But he had, and Billy wasn't letting go.

“Let's get more comfortable,” Dathan whispered and the musical, teasing tone set Billy's blood on fire.

Chapter Seventeen

“I’ve never felt like this before,” Billy murmured quietly, as if half to himself.

“There’s more to come,” Dathan replied just softly as he led them into a large and sumptuous bedroom.

Billy barely noticed the furnishings. He ached for Dathan’s touch - ached to touch him, to taste and explore the tall tightly muscled body that stood before him. It left him panting, breathless, wanting. He teetered on numb legs forcing them to move forward and toward the waiting bed. Dathan gestured for him to sit and with half his mind lost to lust and the other lost to curiosity, he sat without question.

Dathan, still wrapped in his robe strode purposefully to the door, ensuring it was locked. “We don’t need to be disturbed. I want you all to myself, for now at least.”

Billy blinked, his tongue felt thick in his mouth and his body vibrated with anticipation. As Dathan approached the bed he stood tall, looking down at where Billy sat. On instinct Billy opened his legs wide, an invitation for Dathan to move closer.

The urge to rush things warred with the need to take things slow. Billy could picture in his mind’s eye Dathan limp under his touch, flushed and needy, screaming his name. *Yes, he thought, that’s what our future holds.*

“Have you ever lay with a man,” Billy inquired gently, letting his hands roam the supple chest that lay bare before him.

“I’ve not ever seen the need to limit my options,” Dathan replied, his tone low. “And you, Billy?”

“I’ve lived longer than most, most things have been sampled and tested.”

Dathan’s laugh echoed around the space and took Billy’s breath away. Instinctively, with visions of Dathan arching up towards his waiting mouth dancing in his mind, Billy reached for the soft loop of material knotted around Dathan’s waist.

Slowly, with a devilish grin and flickers of desire dancing in his eyes fixed firmly on Dathan's, he loosened it.

A moan fell from his lips as Dathan's throbbing cock bounced up to greet him. Billy's hands wrapped around for another caress of the bountiful firm ass cheeks, and he pulled Dathan's body to meet his mouth, smiling around delicate kisses as Dathan pitched forward and let out a long moan of appreciation.

As his tongue rolled and lapped from the tantalizing curls of hair that encased the freshly engorged dick like a well-framed masterpiece. Billy allowed his mouth to capture the changing tastes that encompassed every inch of the man - his man, his mate, his future.

Dathan began to wobble at the knees, and despite his distraction, Billy caught him before he fell to the ground, rolled his body with back still arched, and laid him deftly on the waiting bed.

With Dathan laid bare before him, Billy's desires turned feral, and he pounced. Beneath him, sprawled across the bed, glistening with residual water of the bath and a thin sheen of sweat, Dathan returned the favor with nips and kisses that sent shivers of delight that pooled and swirled in a place deep inside Billy he thought would lay dormant for eternity.

Billy continued his exploration, his hands roving around Dathan's arched hips, appreciating muscles and seeking the ring of tight muscles that gripped his intended destination. Muscles that tightened and relaxed as Dathan's hips swayed in a frenzied need for friction.

While he longed for friction himself, Billy was filled with need for more heat, more pressure. He longed to sink inside Dathan and never return. As he sought out Dathan's mouth, his mate met him as an equal.

Their lips and tongues thrashed against each other, and Billy wanted to savor it all. He need to capture each arch, every scent and sound that cascaded around their bodies increased.

Billy became acutely aware that almost every inch of their flesh melded with the other, and as Dathan writhed against him Billy feared he would mess all over Dathan before he'd even had a chance to feel the insides of him.

Dathan's hands roved in every direction, doing some exploration of his own. Their engorged cocks slid against one another and Billy reached down to stroke them together. Their pre-come allowed for slick motion. Harder and faster Billy's hands glided up and down.

Dathan begged quietly through panted breaths, "Please, take me. Need, need, need you. Now."

It was the almost whimpered "now" that sent Billy into overdrive and with the force of his age he sat back and pulled Dathan's hips skyward to allow himself an all access pass to that beautiful firm ass.

"My, my," Billy mumbled, "so beautiful, so firm." His hands cascaded over the silken flesh that covered the irreverent muscles that guarded the most perfect star Billy had ever seen. "I need to slick up a little, have you got..."

Before Billy could finish his thought Dathan was pointing to a small chest within arm's reach by the head of the bed. His deft hand found a small bottle of oil and within a matter of seconds he'd de-corked it with his teeth and slathered up his fingers which were already examining the crease of Dathan's ass.

"Inside, please, inside. Now."

Billy chuckled as he slid a finger inside the exquisite tight heat that belonged to Dathan, *my mate*. The words resounded through his being and sent a fresh wave of desire from his head to his toes. He didn't need a hundred percent sight to know the moment was perfect and he would remember it always.

"So impatient," murmured Billy as Dathan thrust forward into his finger.

"More."

It was decidedly more a demand than a request, one to which Billy was happy to oblige. He dutifully added another finger, meeting fleeting resistance as he passed through the ringed wall of muscle, but it quickly relaxed under his sensuous touch.

“So perfect,” he murmured. “It’s as if you’re made just for me.”

“I hoped you would feel it too,” Dathan whispered.

“With every beat of my heart.”

Billy continued to stretch and pulse his fingers into his new mate. He scissored his finger movements, searching out the spot that would send Dathan soaring. Dathan arched and rocked into each thrust, the whimpers and groans he made filled Billy’s heart, patching together the pieces left broken over time.

“Oh gods!” Dathan’s body arched extra high.

Found it, Billy thought with a grin. An urgency filled the air as Billy continued to explore and taste and tease his mate. Billy felt his own cock sputter and ache and as his balls sat heavy, Billy knew he wasn’t going to be able to hold out any longer.

With regret and promise, Billy removed his hands, watching intently as Dathan’s face twisted in pleasure. Billy’s cock, already slick with pre-come was given a courtesy lick of oil from his fingers before he lined himself up.

“This is it, sunshine. You ready for me?”

“I’ve been waiting my life for you.”

With those words floating around his thoughts, Billy slid just inside his mate. Dathan, the man who even through a two-way mirror had summoned him, called to him in a way no one had before.

As Billy’s thighs grazed against Dathan’s buttocks, he whispered his thanks to the Fates and with his gaze skyward he slid slowly forward, inch by delightful inch he pushed

inside. “By all that’s holy,” he whispered, “you feel like silk around me.”

“Make me yours,” Dathan cried.

Billy quickened his pace, and as he pumped and thrust inside Dathan, he imagined their soul merging. Dathan, the gorgeous man that had claimed him, body, mind, and soul from the moment they had been in close proximity, was his. Completely and utterly.

“Not... gonna... last...” Dathan spluttered. His eyes were glazed with lust, his back arched to perfection and the long lines of his torso as his head snapped back exposing the clean lines of his neck called to Billy in such primal fashion it caught him off guard.

“I’m with you there,” he muttered before he lurched forward to capture Dathan’s red swollen lips in a passionate kiss. With their eyes locked in place Billy placed his hand over the space where Dathan’s neck met his shoulder. His palm heated immediately, and the words of commitment fell from his lips.

“My heart, my body, my life, my soul. Yours. Now and for eternity.”

A blinding light burst forth from the space where their skin touched and Billy pulsed, thrust, and pulsed again. Dathan lurched forward with his mouth open, and teeth extended. A flicker in his eyes gave Billy a glimpse of what lay beneath the surface and before Billy could stop to think and rationalize what was taking place, Dathan laid his own claim.

A spike of pain surged in the place where Billy’s neck and shoulder met, but was quickly replaced by the most intense pleasure - pleasure that flooded Billy’s body. Releasing his teeth, Dathan had just one simple word that completed their claim on each other. “Mine.”

Their eyes locked, and even with his limited sight Billy couldn’t deny he’d seen the flicker of an animal peering out from Dathan’s soul. *Who are you?* He wondered momentarily before his instincts fell into disarray, his system stuttered

under the wight of the sensations that flooded him, and his seed spurted inside Dathan's clenched heat.

Billy's heart sung and Dathan lost his load in a heap between their bodies. They both quivered slightly and then slumped forward to capture lips in a sloppy but sensual kiss. Rolling deftly to the side, as if they'd done it a million times, Billy's now half hard cock slid out and left a trail of their joined desire behind him.

It was a long, long moment later before Dathan rose and took a washcloth still warm from the bath and cleaned them both. When he was satisfied, he cast it aside and curled up on Billy's chest, nuzzling his nose into the place he'd laid his claim. His fingers trailed the spot admiring the tattoo left in the wake of Dathan's bite.

Billy turned his head to cast his gaze over the beautiful man. "Who are you Dathan, really?"

Dathan leant in and took his mouth in a crushing kiss. "Yours, Blind Billy, all yours."

And before Billy succumbed to the waves of sleep that crashed over him, he rasped the word more than spoke it as he fell into a soothing sleep.

"Mine."

Chapter Eighteen

Dathan snapped his eyes open to find the late afternoon sun had quickly moved back toward the horizon. He was exhausted, and could easily have slipped back into sleep for another eight or ten hours, but he felt a strong desire to get up and observe the sunset from his west-facing window. It'd been a glorious day, the first he spent with his fated mate, and it had begun with him watching the sun poke its golden head above the horizon; he felt it only fitting that he should end it by watching it slip away again.

He gently eased his arm out from under Billy's neck, and stood back from the bed to take one long luxurious look at his sleeping mate. The Searcher looked like the subject for a painting. His taut, muscular body splayed across the red silk sheet, the down-filled quilt was just kissing his lower back.

Blind Billy Hipp was gorgeous. Sad and lost and set in his ways, Dathan was finding out, but something about it all made him all the more beautiful. It was hard to walk away from him, even if only for a few moments, but knowing that they were fully devoted to each other made it a little bit easier.

Besides, if Dathan didn't go right that moment, he'd miss the sunset altogether.

He didn't bother putting on a robe as he didn't want to risk making any more noise than was necessary. He opened the door to the bedroom as silently as he could, stepped through the opening, soundless as a cat, and then eased the door shut until the latch whispered that it was closed.

"Well, that's quite the look, I must say!"

Charlotte's voice slapped Dathan in the ass, and he spun around on his feet with lightning speed.

"Aunt Tottie!" he cried as he instinctively cupped his hands over his reddened genitals. "What are you doing here?"

"Picking you up for dinner, silly. What do you think?"

"Dinner?"

“Of course! A suit is required at Lorenzo’s,” she playfully added with a wink, “but you might want to change out of your birthday one into something a bit more... formal?”

Dathan squealed as he reached for the first thing he could find to conceal his massive manhood: a large white card sitting on the side table. He could have sworn his eye caught a bold number ‘3’ written upon one side as it flashed towards his crotch.

“Oh please, Dathan darling, it’s not anything I haven’t seen before. Now tut, tut. Get dressed. The carriage is waiting.”

Dathan stole a glance towards the west window then back again in rapid succession. The sun was sinking as fast as his balls. “What dinner? I... you... there’s... argh!” He groaned. “You really must give me more notice, Aunt Tottie, and stop coming in here unannounced. Please.” He pleaded desperately and his voice climbed in both pitch and volume.

“I did give you notice, silly. You’re holding the card. I dropped it with Sanders hours ago and told him to bring it straight up to you.”

Dathan glanced down and tipped the card forward. It was the same one he held in the line-up yesterday. On the other side of the large black ‘3’ were some words scribbled in terrible handwriting.

“Your uncle wants to formally thank you for helping out yesterday. Wasn’t it sweet of him to write the invitation on the back of your line-up number? Sometimes that man surprises me.”

At that moment, the bedroom door creaked open.

“Is everything OK?” Billy whispered. “I heard your voice. You sound nervous.”

Tottie’s eyes opened wide as she stood up to get a better look. “Speaking of surprises... aren’t you going to introduce me to your guest, Dathan dear?”

Dathan poked his head into the bedroom behind the door. Billy was wrapped in his robe and holding his gun, his thumb on the hammer ready to cock it. Dathan gently eased the gun down and whispered for Billy to hand him the other robe. Once fully covered, he eased the door fully open to reveal his mate. He mouthed the most genuine ‘sorry’ to Billy that he could manage.

“Billy Hipp? Charlotte Giovane,” he said as he half-heartedly gestured back and forth across the room. “Aunt Charlotte, Billy Hipp.”

“Well hello, hello, hello,” Charlotte smiled with indulgent grin, like she was picking out a lobster to eat for dinner. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Hipp. My goodness, those eyes of yours. I do declare they could stop a steam train in its tracks.”

“On its tracks, Aunt Tottie.” Dathan clocked the smile that was spreading over his aunt’s face, and pinched the top bridge of his nose in embarrassment. “And Billy is here with me.”

“Oh I can see that, my dear nephew. I can see that as clear as the dimple in your cheek.” She leaned into Billy. “His lower cheek, I mean. I’m sure you’ve seen it.”

Billy blushed. “Yes ma’am.”

“And polite? My stars, you’re the entire package, you are. Hang on to this one, Dathan.”

“I plan to, Aunt Tottie.”

“Of course if you need someone to watch him for a while...”

“Aunt Tottie, please. Billy is my one true mate. And I’m his.”

Charlotte pierced her lips in a moment of sober judgement. “Is that so?”

Whether or not she was directing the question to Billy, he replied without an ounce of shame.

“It is so, Miss Charlotte. Wonderfully so.”

She laughed, sized Billy up with her eyes one more time, and took another deep breath as a shudder of lust shook down her back.

“Well I hope he cleans up well, because your uncle is waiting. I’m happy to help get you dressed,” she added to Billy, then turned to Dathan. “... if it will speed things along.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Tottie, but it will have to be another night. We have plans to spend the evening alone.”

“Oh please, Dathan, don’t pretend like you have a choice in the matter. Your uncle is waiting at the club as we speak. We’ll simply add another seat for your new friend.”

“He’s my mate.”

“Of course,” she blinked. “Your mate.” She clapped her hands together twice in quick succession then opened the door. “I’ll be waiting below in the carriage. See you very soon, Mr. Billy Hipp.”

Chapter Nineteen

Billy watched with unfocused pleasure as Dathan got dressed for dinner, still half asleep but happy enough to enjoy the view.

“Are you sure you want me to come along?” Billy was equally split between hoping his mate would let him off the hook and wanting him to talk him into it.

“Of course,” Dathan replied as he stepped into his dark studded pants, the collar of his white cotton shirt much stiffer than Billy’s eyes were able to admit. “Besides you heard Aunt Tottie. She’s expecting you to join us.”

Billy was already dressed. His buckskin jacket and two-day-old shirt would have to suffice. He was dusty, but clean. Presentable, but nowhere near stylish. “I’m not popular with lawmen, Dathan, and your uncle is the damn Commissioner of Police.”

Dathan was pinning his cuffs together with a pair of brass links. “Don’t be nervous, my sweet. He won’t be bringing his work with him to dinner. Besides, you’re popular with me and that’s all that matters.”

“I’m not nervous for myself,” Billy replied. “Only for your sake. I really don’t want to be the cause of family tension,” he said as he helped Dathan pull on his boots.

“I appreciate that,” Dathan said. “And though I can’t guarantee that there won’t be tension around the table, I’m sure it will have more to do with my aunt’s relentless flirtation and the embarrassment that will spray out to the rest of us. My uncle included. If you’re strong enough to withstand her advances and innuendo, then everything else will be easy as pie.”

Billy nodded and pursed his lips. Compromises were part of any relationship, he knew that much, nor did his mate come without baggage. Nobody was baggage free once they reached adulthood. He either had to accept Dathan and his family, his world, and the wide variety of good and bad that came with it all, or reject it. The last thing he wanted was to end their first day together apart from each other.

It was clear that Dathan wasn't about to refuse the invitation, and so that meant Billy either joined him fully or not at all. The torment that would follow option two far outweighed the discomfort that would be caused by option one, so he got over himself and his hesitations and walked proudly to the lift door with his incredibly handsome mate.

It helped that they kissed passionately all the way down to the ground floor. Billy was wiping his mouth and smiling like a cat stuffed with a canary when Sanders opened the door to the carriage for them.

"Well that was quick," Charlotte quipped as they settled in beside her. The carriage was considerably roomier and better equipped than the one they hired from the beach that morning. Billy couldn't help recalling the wonderful activities enjoyed from his previous ride.

"I'm surprised you didn't enjoy a little romp before coming down."

Billy shook his head and kept his eyes lowered, stifling a laugh upon Dathan's quick reply:

"My dear Aunt Tottie... how do you know we didn't?"

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Billy's senses were assaulted upon walking inside the renowned restaurant known as Lorenzo's. The noise of whistles and steam exhaust mixed with the loud chatter and laughter of the patrons. It was essentially everything he hated about the city compressed into a small, enclosed space.

With help from Dathan describing things, he formed an accurate picture of his surrounds. The space was split between the tavern and dining area, with heavy, steel batwing doors separating the two. The doors and walls were made of strapped metal held together with crudely pounded rivets.

Ship locks and glass-covered gauges added to the rough decor, which was starkly contrasted with a staged living room in the center of it all, complete with fine velvet chez-lounges, smoking corners, and ornately carved oak side tables. A large

gargoyle streetlamp sat in the middle of the living room area, with an intricately cast four-headed beast leering out in all directions, spreading warm light throughout the room.

Most of the serving ‘staff’ were highly specialized automatons, who ferried food and drink from the kitchen to designated tables. It was a terrific investment for the owners, but it had paid off over the last couple of years. Curious clientele came for the experience, the steamy ambience, and ended up returning for the excellent food and unrivalled indulgence that could be had there.

Billy and Dathan took their seats at one of the tables in the center of the dining room. His mate’s uncle could certainly command a private table if he wanted, but Billy assumed the Police Commissioner preferred instead to be seen and heard by all. He was, after all, campaigning to be mayor, and so every outing - even a family dinner - was an opportunity for exposure.

“Uncle William, this is my fated mate and partner: Billy Hipp.” Dathan spoke with unwavering confidence.

“Blind Billy Hipp needs no introduction, m’boy,” his uncle barked as he bit down on a cigar. “Question is: what in the hell is he doing sitting at my table with my one and only nephew?”

Billy cleared his throat. *This is off to a flying start.*

“Uncle, please,” Dathan began but was cut off.

“How do you think it might look for the Commissioner of Police to be seated with an infamous bounty hunter and outlaw at the most popular restaurant in the city? Sometimes I wonder if you think at all with that pretty little head of yours, man.”

The awkward silence bore into them all, and both Charlotte and her nephew lowered their eyes in shame. Billy, however, kept his gaze fixed on the uncle. He was not accustomed to being bullied and would fight the Commissioner if it came to that.

“Very well, then,” Dathan said as he pushed out his chair. “We’ll leave.”

“Oh don’t be daft, boy,” Uncle William quietly intoned, his vocal tone betraying the greasy smile that Billy imagined to be fixed permanently upon his face. “The damage has been done now. If you leave before cocktails are served, you’ll only succeed in adding insult to the injury you’ve already inflicted upon my reputation.”

Dathan was suspended between staying and going. Billy knew that if he didn’t say something right then, his anger would only build and blow later. He laid his hand visibly on the lap of his mate while keeping his cloudy eyes on the uncle.

“You and Charlotte seem to have a loving, supportive marriage. I admire that,” Billy said, his tone measured and calm. “Dathan and I are awfully new to this whole fated mate coupling thing, and so have plenty to learn from those more experienced and seasoned in the trade. However,” he whispered as he leaned in closer, “I promise you I know this much: if someone were to speak so disrespectfully to my partner like you did just now, I would make sure they answered for it, one way or the other. You’re no exception. Now either you offer your nephew an apology here and now, or you’ll find more than your reputation irreparably damaged. Friend or foe, kin or stranger, nobody gets away with saying what you just said to the man I love. Not on my watch.”

William held Billy’s gaze for what seemed like hours. A pack of dynamite could have gone off between them and the tension would still stand, stubborn as steel. The Commissioner then exploded into a peal of laughter that would have knocked a dog off its chain. A waiter approached with a round of cocktails in fine crystal glasses.

“Drop these off and then bring us a bottle of your most exclusive champagne. Looks like we’re celebrating my nephew’s good fortune. He’s found himself a real man!” As the waiter bot turned mechanically around, Uncle William leaned confidentially into Billy. “You’ve got a set of balls on you, Blind Billy Hipp, I’ll give you that. I hear we share a mutual friend and benefactor in Oliver Wendell, so I’m willing

to call a truce for the time being. But this battle is far from over.”

The Police Commissioner raised his glass. “My deepest apologies, Dathan, my boy. I was talking before thinking once again, and for that I am profoundly sorry. Of course, you and your beloved mate are welcome at my table anytime. I beg your forgiveness.” He bowed his head and waited.

Billy glanced at Charlotte and his mate. Both seemed stunned. He nudged Dathan in the shoulder.

“You’re... you’re forgiven, Uncle. Don’t give it another thought.”

“You’re too kind, my boy, too kind.”

Billy leaned back and raised his glass along with the rest. The sweet mix of spirits tasted foreign on his tongue, but he drank it all the same.

The bottle of champagne was followed by another, then another, but both Billy and Dathan were able to stick to one glass each. As his mate’s uncle and aunt became more and more drunk and merry, the parade of visitors to the table increased in volume.

The Commissioner was in fine form, shaking hands, sharing a laugh, and lighting cigar after cigar. As for Charlotte, her flirtatious advances towards Billy soon gave way to more high society recipients, which suited him just fine. Included in them was none other than Settembrini. The two exchanged knowing glances, but neither uttered a word.

The meal came to the table in endless courses, and Billy ate a little from the first few plates, but soon found himself passing on the rest. Quail’s eggs and beef wellington; mutton shank and poached trout; all sorts of offal and an assortment of sweetbreads, each bite more savory and bloodier than the last, along with a perpetual wooden board stocked to the max with cheese and grapes.

After three hours of unfettered indulgence, both Billy and Dathan had had enough. To their mutual surprise, neither

Charlotte nor her husband resisted when they announced their departure.

“I’ll walk you both out, handsome one and handsome two,” Charlotte said, positioning herself between Billy and Dathan and linking each of her arms in theirs.

“A word, Dathan, before you go.” Billy found his mate pulled back by Uncle William as he was led forward by Aunt Tottie. He resisted the pull forward, not trusting his mate to be left alone with the drunken Commissioner of Police.

“Don’t fret, Billy Boy,” Charlotte slurred, pawing his shoulder as they walked. “Dathan can handle himself with Uncle Blowhard. He won’t be long and you’re entirely safe with me.”

Nevertheless, Billy couldn’t help but look over his shoulder. All he saw was a blurred arm, cigar smoldering between fattened fingers, hanging over the blurred shoulders of his mate who was stooping down to listen.

Chapter Twenty

Dathan didn't appreciate the tactic employed by his aunt and uncle to separate him from his mate, and told his uncle so.

"Cry me a river, Sunshine," Uncle William shot back. "Now listen up. I'm going to make this quick and clear, so you don't mistake my meaning. You will not, I repeat, NOT continue in this nonsense with that renegade one minute further. I forbid it."

Dathan rolled his eyes. "I was wondering when the real Uncle William was going to return this evening. Thank you for not letting me walk out in complete suspense."

"Keep your quips to yourself, cheeky boy, and listen to what I'm saying."

"I am listening, uncle. You're coming through loud and clear. I just won't dignify your words with any kind of response."

His uncle tightened his grip on Dathan's sore shoulder, as the wafting cigar smoke began to sting his eyes. "You think you can ignore me on this?"

"I'm long past the age wherein you have any say in my life," Dathan replied as he painfully yanked his shoulder out his uncle's grip. "I'm twenty-five years old and free to make whatever choices I wish to, particularly when it comes to whom I spend my life with."

Uncle William shrugged. He was the Police Commissioner, after all, and was well practiced in not getting riled up by someone he was threatening.

"Don't forget where your allowance comes from..." he began.

"We'll live without it."

"...and who will soon rule this town..."

"We'll move and live elsewhere."

"... and who can have your pretty little blue-eyed boyfriend locked up and sent to the gallows before you're finished with

your manicurist...”

“Billy’s evaded your police force up until now. I’m confident he can withstand your attempts at capturing him going forward.”

The uncle gazed wearily into his nephew’s eyes. Dathan could see how drunk he was, and wondered if he’d even remember this conversation let alone follow through on any of his threats.

“I’ve spent my life ensuring I had friends in all the right places. Some in the spotlight, others lurking in the shadows. All of them have pledged their loyalty to me, and will do whatever I ask of them, regardless of the cost to themselves. And yet, my nephew, my own flesh and blood, will not do the simplest thing when I request it.”

“Aside from standing in your police line-up you mean?” Dathan said. “Which I understand was the reason behind this dinner. To thank me.”

“You’re absolutely right, my lad. Thank you.”

Dathan clapped his uncle on the back and took a step away, then turned around once more. “You know what? It should be me thanking you, Uncle. Not the other way around.”

“How so?”

Dathan could see the man swaying slightly on his feet, the cigar smoking itself between his thick fingers. “If not for you asking me to do you that favor, I never would have met Billy in the first place. You’re the one who brought us together. I’ll always hold a special place in my heart for you because of that.”

Dathan fixed his custom made bowler on his head, and flipped out his jacket tails as he took his leave, leaving a glowering uncle behind him. He could well imagine the man was already thinking of ways to do away with him and Billy, but they’d be the plans of a drunk man. Come morning, Dathan was sure his uncle would’ve forgotten all about it. Kissing his aunt on the cheek, he retrieved his mate from her arm.

“You best get back to Uncle William, Tottie,” Dathan said. “I fear he may fall over at any moment.”

“Yes, he’s imbibed way more than his fair share tonight. Haven’t we all?”

Dathan squeezed Billy’s hand. Clearly she didn’t know that the two of them had been nursing their glasses all night long.

“Such a delicious pleasure to meet you, Blind Billy,” Tottie offered as she leaned in for a kiss on the cheek. As Dathan’s mate was about to oblige, Tottie turned her face suddenly and caught Billy full on her mouth, wrapping her arms around his neck to hold him in for a prolonged smooch.

“Honestly, Aunt Tottie, have you no shame at all?”

She pulled off with a satisfied grin, licking her lips as she did so, and sauntered back to her inebriated husband.

“What did your uncle have to say?” Billy asked as the two stepped outside.

“Oh, the usual protestations at my choices, along with a slew of warnings about what would happen if I didn’t tow the line.”

“Anything in particular I should know?”

“Nah,” Dathan replied. “We may have to move away and change our names and live off love for the rest of our lives, but other than that, we’re good.”

Billy laughed. “I’d be happy with all that,” he said.

Dathan agreed. “Let’s go to the park,” he said. “I have something I want to show you before another minute passes.”

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The moon was full as they crossed over the terrace that bordered the park on the East side, and soon it felt like they weren’t in the city at all anymore.

The air was warm, and the deeper they went into the greenery, the fewer people they encountered. The sound of shifters howling at the light of the moon graced their ears.

Dathan led Billy wordlessly by the hand towards the lake, and stopped when they got to the water's edge. The surface of the man-made lagoon was even calmer than it was last night. Billy was eyeing the destination with curious suspicion, and nearly burst into tears when Dathan reached down for a flat rock, and skipped it across the water.

"What are you...?" Billy started to ask, but Dathan stopped his question with a kiss.

"Stay here," he whispered, and slipped off behind a canopy of trees, out of full sight of his half-blind mate.

Dathan took a series of deep breaths, all designed to convince him he was doing the right thing, and shifted easily into his other self. When he emerged from the trees, he slowly approached his man at the lake. Billy watched him come forward, and with each step, he heard his mate draw a deeper, sharper breath. When he was at Billy's side, he nudged him gently, and whinnied his affection.

"It was you," Billy gently whispered. "It is you."

Dathan felt his lover's strong hands run up and down his neck. He pressed himself tighter to Billy, who seemed to float atop his back. To Dathan, Billy felt like a missing part of himself that fit in so easily, so effortlessly, that it hardly seemed he carried anything at all.

Dathan broke into a fast run as clouds drifted across the light of the moon. Taking advantage of the darkened sky, he tilted his head back repeatedly as he ran.

"What is it, my love?" Billy asked.

Dathan repeated the movement, until Billy inched himself closer to Dathan's hind legs. Having his rider clear of his withers now, Dathan increased his speed as his wings emerged from the tops of his shoulders. He winced a bit as one side sent a sharp pain. He really needed to exercise more often if for no other reason than to stave off the cramps he felt the other night.

As Dathan lifted his feet off the ground, he felt Billy's grip tighten on his mane and with his legs pressed deftly into his girth. He knew it was stupid and dangerous and reckless to launch from the park, but he didn't care who saw him take flight anymore. He only wanted to be free with his mate, to be his whole self from the beginning.

If Billy freaked out and went running to the hills, Dathan would be devastated, but it would be nothing compared to the anguish he would feel if he hid who he truly was another minute.

As he cleared the tops of the trees and charted a course due west, outside the city's boundaries, he glanced quickly at the moon. The clouds were perfectly thick, obscuring the image of a flying horse with a rider on his back. A rider, Dathan was relieved to hear, who was laughing and crying all at once, squeezing his legs ever tighter as he pressed his face into Dathan's wind-blown mane.

Chapter Twenty-One

It had been a very long time since Billy felt the streams of ecstasy flowing through his veins. He enjoyed every second of his flight above the forests and plains. Squeezing tightly with his legs, wrapping them around the flanks of his mate, he took in the city from a perspective he never imagined he would have.

It wasn't as big as he thought it was, first of all. The lights around the border on the west side clearly outlined where it began and ended. The east side was bordered by the ocean, as well as the south. The northern edge was narrow and felt like a mere stone's throw across from way up high.

The park in the middle of it all, where their flight began, where their love began, was a fuzzy rectangle of trees, paths, and various bodies of water. From way up in the sky, even with Billy's reduced vision, it all appeared so ordered and planned. Not at all like the wild imperfection of the countryside, where straight lines did not exist, and trees blended into fields into meadows and back into trees again.

They came to a landing in a wide open meadow, and Billy was astonished at how smooth the descent was and the reconnection with the earth. It was as if they had never left the ground.

He dismounted and stood back, taking in the wondrous creature whom he loved more and more. The clouds had cleared from the moon, and so there was sufficient light for Billy to make out the general shape of Dathan's wings and their position on his magnificent body.

The wingspan was impressive, easily spreading out to fifteen or twenty yards, or about a hundred and fifty hands wide. The feathers, upon his curious touch, were intricately layered and of various lengths. In an age where machines could look like humans, carriages could move on their own without aid of an animal, and steam locomotives could travel hundreds of miles along a track using only fire and water to propel it along, Billy

had grown accustomed to witnessing the impossible. But Dathan was in a class of his own.

He walked the length of Dathan's wings, and felt around the joint where they connected to his shoulders. All was seamless, and appeared as natural as any bird. This was not a manufactured bit of innovation, but a pure act of nature.

Dawn would soon spill across the sky. Dathan whinnied and neighed, then began walking back towards the city. Billy followed. Half an hour passed before any words were spoken.

"Somewhere deep inside me," Billy began, "I knew about you all along. Not you as Dathan, which is still a wonderful surprise I hope I never get used to. But I knew that you existed as you fully are, or I wanted you to exist so badly my desire brought you to life. In any case, all this is to say I'm so glad we found each other at last. Yesterday I was happy; today I'm ecstatic."

As they approached the city limits, for the first time he could remember, Billy didn't get that sinking feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach.

"I've done this before, you know. Ridden on a creature like you. I've never told a soul as it would take far too long to convince them I was speaking the truth, and even then I doubt anyone would fully believe it. I probably wouldn't. But I can tell you. I was young and fearless and eager to prove myself. Which I did.

"There are always monsters in one form or another threatening the peaceful existence of the innocent. Monsters that none could vanquish. I took it upon myself to do what no one could do before me. I wish I could say it was for selfless reasons, but that wouldn't be altogether honest. I wanted the fame, the glory, the accolades.

"Not sure what I was trying to prove back then, and to whom. Courage shouldn't be thought of too much, I guess. Anyway, I achieved the impossible, on the back of a beautiful, winged horse. I couldn't have done it without him."

Billy kept his hand on Dathan's back while he spoke. The path turned to streets. The harsh yellow light of gaslit lamps began to replace the soft white light of the moon. Billy could hear the hissing and hum of the city as he walked amongst the buildings towards the center. Thankfully, most of the inhabitants were sound asleep in their beds.

"Riding that magnificent creature made me feel whole. We were an incredible team, he and I. I loved him like I've never loved anything or anyone before or since." He leaned into Dathan's ear and added "Until now." The animal blew happily through his lips in response.

"I thought the two of us, the winged horse and I, deserved a place among the gods. So I mounted my beloved and together we began to fly up to the top of the mountain where they resided. About halfway there, my trusty mount was bitten in the ear. By a fly. A tiny insect. How could anything so small be so devastating?"

"My horse was spooked, and reared his front legs up in a reaction entirely natural to him. I was thrown. Had we been on the ground, I wouldn't have fallen far. But we were in the air, amongst the clouds. I lost my grip and felt myself falling. I've never been so afraid. There's no fear that even comes close to causing the level of terror that comes with falling. I doubt I would have survived my landing if not for the large, soft flowers that broke my fall. I was flailing all the way down, and continued to flail while in amongst the giant hogweed. Both of my legs were broken, as well as my arms. Ribs, neck, one hip. Nearly every bone in my body. And the sap from the flowers burned my skin and eyes. I couldn't see a thing afterwards."

It took Billy some time to tell the whole story, pausing during the difficult moments to recall the memory. Something he hadn't done much of for years. They soon arrived at the entrance to the park.

"It took ages before I was able to walk again, to build up my strength. It gave me a lot of time to think. I realized that I had spent my life doing things for me while telling myself I was

doing them for everyone else. Killing monsters can seem like a selfless act unless you're doing it to build yourself up. Anyway, I decided that once I was able to function normally again, I would devote my life to helping others. That's how I became a Searcher."

They arrived at the lake's edge, and Dathan slipped away once again to the grove of trees off to the side. Billy squinted around for anyone nearby as he desperately needed to empty his bladder. He thought back to the night's flight and shook his head in wonder at the craziness of it all.

He knew he would have to get to work soon on Wendell's case, and bring about an end to the honeymoon phase with his extraordinary lover. Or at the very least, a suspension of it. He didn't want the wonder of their relationship to ever end.

When Dathan returned, Billy was skipping rocks across the lake.

"Quite the night," Dathan said. His shirt and jacket hung loosely upon his frame and his feet were bare. "My boots always go missing when I shift. Stolen or they run off on their own. Sometimes I'm too exhausted to bother to pull them back on."

Billy wrapped his arms around his lover and kissed him long on the mouth.

"Thanks for sharing your story," Dathan whispered. "I hope you feel as close with me as you did with your animal before. He sounds very special."

"He was," Billy replied. "And so are you. I couldn't ask for anything more."

Dathan rolled his shoulder back and winced slightly as he did so.

"Sorry, It always gets a bit stiff after flight. The first time I flew, I realized that I had no idea how to land. Taking off is always easier than coming back. I crashed like an idiot those first few attempts and messed up my shoulder. It hasn't fully healed yet."

Billy sat him down on a boulder and stood behind him, massaging his shoulders and neck.

“Mmmmm, that’s incredible,” Dathan sighed as he closed his eyes in blissful relaxation. “I have heard tell of animals like me. Growing up, I mean. When I first shifted into a horse, I took it upon myself to become an expert in them, learning all about the different kinds and how they were used throughout history. War, travel, work, companionship. I devoured it all.

“My uncle and aunt have known about my ability to shift since the beginning. They don’t like it. They’re afraid of what it means only because it’s different from who they are. I’ve learned to keep it a secret for the most part, and would always sneak away in the middle of the night to run free. By the time I started to accept who I was, and stop feeling so ashamed by it, my wings started to grow. It scared the shit out of me, I won’t lie, and sent me into another phase of secrecy.”

“When was that?” Billy asked.

“About four years ago. I turned twenty one, and the next morning felt a tingling on my shoulders. I escaped the city and shifted in seclusion. They started out as hard lumps. It felt better to be on all fours, but I had no way of knowing what was happening. And had no one to ask. Over the next few weeks, the bump grew. Once they broke through my hide, it was less painful, but to see them, the shadow of them in the moonlight... I never really got my head around it.”

“No kidding.” Billy chuckled softly. “Who would?”

“For some reason, I was slow to make the connection between wings growing out of my shoulders and the ability to fly. I don’t know what I was thinking. I was overwhelmed with the strangeness of it all, and terrified that I would be seen. Then one night, I was running a long stretch, feeling so free and safe. I ran faster and faster. It wasn’t until I was a few hundred feet above ground that I happened to look down. It was the greatest feeling of my life.”

He reached up and cupped Billy’s hand on his shoulder.

“No one knows about it. My wings, that is. My ability to fly. Not my uncle. Nor Aunt Tottie. Not even Sanders, who knows more or less everything about me. You’re the only one. My other self.”

Billy could feel his heart swell at this information, along with another vital organ, and felt the urge to take his fated mate right then and there. Beside a lake, in the park, in the middle of the city, in the middle of the night. He wanted to be fully one with Dathan, and sink himself into his beloved forever more.

He was about to act on this powerful desire when a scream pierced the silence and stillness, and sent a shudder of alarm coursing down his spine.

“That wasn’t far away,” Dathan said as he leapt to his feet.

A second scream sounded.

“I know that voice,” Billy cried as he ran off down the path.

He didn’t have a chance to ask Dathan to follow along, but his mate was right behind him all the same.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Dathan was rushing up the path, trying to find his mate in the dark. Ironic when he was the one with full sight, yet he was struggling to find his half-blind mate.

“Billy? Billy, where are you?” He was half calling, half whispering for reasons he couldn’t fully explain. Screaming in the park was not uncommon at any hour of the day or night, but Dathan could feel something was terribly wrong in the stillness of the air. It wasn’t so much fear that was coursing through his veins, but something deeper and far more troubling.

“Over here.”

Hearing Billy’s voice put him a little bit more at ease. There was hardly a trail off the main path, but Dathan stepped through anyway, pushing aside bushes and branches until he came to a small clearing. In the middle of it was his Billy, kneeling on the ground, holding a young teenage girl in his arms. Her eyes were staring out to the starry sky, locked in terror.

“Oh dear god, what happened?” He crouched down and laid his hand against the girl’s face. It was icy cold to the touch.

“Lana woke up here and screamed,” Billy said. “I’ve been asking her what happened, but she hasn’t been able to answer me. She’s in shock.”

Dathan removed his jacket and draped it over the girl’s chest.

“Lana? You know her, Billy?”

“Not well. I found her once. She’s Settembrini’s daughter. He was at the restaurant last night, cozying up with your uncle.”

Dathan nodded. “Yes, I remember seeing him.”

“He hired me to find her ten days ago, and then didn’t want to pay my fee since she ran out again. I reckon she’s been sneaking out every night since.”

Dathan pulled down the bottoms of her eyes, and leaned in to listen to her heartbeat. “She’s a wolf shifter, yes?”

Billy nodded.

“She’s cold to the touch on a warm night, and very pale. I think she’s lost a lot of blood. You think she’s been stabbed or shot or... something else?” Dathan didn’t want to consider what that ‘something else’ might have been.

Billy shook his head. “I know what’s happened to her. Same thing that’s been happening to a number of young wolf shifters lately. Someone’s preying on them, mining them for blood, and leaving them cold and terrified in the park.”

“A vampire?” Dathan quickly checked her neck. “She has no bite wounds.”

“It’s not a vampire,” Billy replied, “Well, not literally. Some sick soul has found a way to extract just enough of their life-force to keep them alive, but not enough to allow them to shift again. She’s his latest victim.”

Dathan considered the horror of losing the ability to shift. He nearly gagged on the nausea that the thought stirred up inside of him. “Fucking horrid. Who would do that? And to teenagers?”

“I don’t know,” Billy said, “but I’m hoping she can help us find out.”

Dathan, motivated with empathy that only another shifter like himself could have for her, gently slapped his palm against the girl’s cheek.

“Lana, can you hear me? My name is Dathan. I’m a shifter like you. I’m here to help. Just blink if you can hear me.”

She blinked, and focused her eyes on Dathan then Billy. “I... I can... hear you,” she whispered with a faint voice.

“Good. This is Billy. You’ve met before. He’s also here to help. What happened? What do you remember?”

The girl tried to sit herself up. Her makeup of dark eyeliner and blood red lipstick was smudged against her cheeks. Her leather pants and black corset, both so tight fitting at the beginning of the evening, now hung a bit looser on her small frame. The fashionable piercings and chains - steel buckles, clips, and cogs in steel and brass - dangled limply off her clothing and earlobes.

“I got invited,” she started to say, as tears welled up in her eyes. “All my friends had been invited to the party except me, and I wanted it so badly... finally it came.”

Dathan looked at Billy.

“This is how the predator lures them in. Invitations to a secret party, with a coded message letting them know about arranged transport, done that way so it can’t be traced.”

“Who invited you?” Dathan pressed.

“I don’t... I don’t know... I just put my hand in my pocket and there it was. The invitation. Like it appeared out of nowhere.”

“Do you still have it?” Billy asked.

The girl shook her head. “We have to give it up as proof, in order to get it.”

“Get in? Get in where? Where is the party, Lana?”

She was shaking her head back and forth as new tears flowed down her cheeks. “I don’t know. I was masked. Blindfolded. It all seemed so... so crazy and fun. Wild. I just went along with it.”

“Do you remember any sounds or smells or voices? Anything at all that might tell us where you were?”

“It was a train. I heard the steam whistle and the chugging sound of the wheels on the track...”

Dathan looked at Billy again. His mate shrugged and bit down on his lip. “A train... could be headed anywhere from any platform at any station.”

“Lana, listen to me. Did anyone speak to you?”

Her eyes blinked rapidly, as if she was dreaming all of a sudden, and then she shut them tight as a new round of tears fought to get through.

“I remember... there was one voice... say... say...”

“What?” Dathan’s heart was racing now. “What did the voice say?”

“He said I would forget everything. Even the needle he was about to stick in my arm. He said it wouldn’t hurt, but it did. I was laughing, thinking of the great party we were going to, when I stopped and cried out. ‘Ouch!’ I yelled, still laughing. ‘You said it wasn’t going to hurt.’ And he said something I didn’t understand... say... say...”

Billy suddenly lifted his head up. “C’est la vie. C’est la vie.”

“Yes,” Lana cried. “That was it. What does it mean?”

“It’s French, Lana,” Dathan explained. “It means ‘oh well... such is life’ or something to that effect. Right, Billy? Billy?”

He looked to his mate, only to find Billy’s expression had changed dramatically. His eyes were blazing with ferocious discovery, their icy blue shine amplified a hundred fold. “Am I right, Billy? That’s what that means, right? “

Billy nodded, slowly. “Yeah,” he said. “Such is life. I know who did this.”

“Who?”

Dathan heard the buzzing in the air before he saw the little mechanical hornet land on Billy’s neck. It had tiny metallic wings that fluttered and flapped through intricate, wind-up mechanics. Before Billy could answer Dathan’s question of ‘who?’, his head flopped forward, and his arms splayed out to his sides.

“Billy!” Dathan called, but suddenly felt a sharp prick on his own neck. He tried to lift his arm to get it, but found that he couldn’t move.

He was entirely numb when his vision clouded over. Then everything went completely dark.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Billy awoke with a terrible headache. He had no idea for how long he had been out, where he was, or what the reason behind it all was. What he did know was that it somehow all connected back to Oliver Wendell.

Dathan lay beside him on a bed, still unconscious. Billy felt for a pulse, listened for his breathing, and - once convinced that he was asleep and in no immediate danger - let him snore.

It was late in the day, Billy knew that much. He could tell by the quality of light that spilled across the bed. Something obstructed the light - strange square shadows - so he stood up and looked around.

They were inside a prison of some sort. Steel bars ran from the ground up to the sky, creating a barrier between them and the great outdoors. Panels of steel, about nine square yards each, were evenly spaced and fastened to the bars. Billy couldn't figure out what the purpose of those reverse windows were. The warm afternoon wind blew in along with the light, and Billy breathed it in. Whatever drug they hit him with was still lingering around, and he felt his balance start to sway. He leaned against the bars to catch his breath.

Take it slow, Billy, he reminded himself. Take it slow.

He could make out four barred walls, each adorned with similar sized steel panels. In the middle of the room was a bed, a large cast iron tub was off to the side, with the same mechanical taps he had seen in Dathan's apartment. A fold-away screen stood to one side of the tub, providing privacy. The lavatory was completed with a steel box, atop which was a finely crafted hole and seat to sit upon.

Indoor toilet? The idea disgusted him to his core.

As soon as his brain had mentioned the word toilet to him, of course, Billy felt the urge to go. He walked the length of cage towards the loo, and as he made his way, he felt along the bars for the door. But there was no door. The floor beneath his feet

was wall-to-wall marble tile, with no sign of a trap door or possibility to dig through an exit.

The only other way was up. The deep blue of a late afternoon sky extended past the tops of the walls, but was easily thirty or forty feet away from where he stood. The steel bars of the walls rose up like a fortress to the top. There was no ceiling as far as Billy could see, but he wasn't trusting his limited vision all that much. He'd wait to ask Dathan once his mate woke up.

After fumbling with the screen for three minutes, he managed to stand it between the toilet box and the bed, and went about his business as quietly as he could. When finished, the thought occurred to him that this hole may well be the only door in or out of this place. If it was, he was shit out of luck: there would be no way he could fit through the opening. Dathan's shoulders were far too broad to even give it a second thought. The news hit him with equal parts disappointment and relief.

He moved the screen aside to find his beloved mate awake and sitting up, rubbing his neck.

"How are you feeling?" Billy asked.

Dathan shook his head. "I don't know. A bit cloudy, like I've spent the last four days drinking bad whiskey, but otherwise fine. You?"

"Same," Billy answered. "I woke up a few minutes before you. As far as I can see, we're locked up inside a steel prison."

"The door's locked, I take it?" Dathan asked as he tentatively got to his feet.

"That's just it. There is no door. Just these steel panels that run up to the sky."

Dathan stood and looked up, shading his eyes with his hand. "No roof at all. That makes sense. Those panels would prevent anybody from climbing up the bars and getting out. So why build a roof?"

Billy nodded in agreement. "A fella would have to fly out."

"Like a bird," Dathan said, a smile warming up on his face.

“Like a bird,” Billy repeated, and shared in Dathan’s smile. “There’s uh... some facilities there if you need to... you know...”

Dathan looked over to where Billy was nodding his head. “Ah. Indoor lavatory. Such a brilliant innovation. I’ve been looking into getting one myself.”

Billy bit down on his lip, deciding it was not the time to get into a debate about the benefits and drawbacks of modern technology. “Go have your tinkle and I’ll keep exploring. There’s a series of cupboards and a larder there; hopefully it has something to eat in it.”

“Wouldn’t that be great? I’m starving,” Dathan commented as he undid his pants, not even bothering with the screen. “But why would our captor, whoever it may be, provide food?”

Billy whistled loudly. He had opened the larder door and found it stocked with all sorts of meats, cheeses, biscuits, and breads. An assortment of rabbits and fowl hung on hooks from a large steel cross bar that ran the length of the room. A keg of ale was tapped and ready to go, wooden crates of wine were stacked four high, and a large barrel of water was there for drinking. Billy drew some out with a ladle: it was cool and refreshing.

He heard something moving behind him, and turned at the same time he reached for his gun.

“May I serve you?”

Billy exhaled a great sigh of relief. It was an automaton, about four feet tall, dressed in black servant’s wear, a crisp white napkin folded over a lever at its front. It was an older model, more robot than person, that rolled around on some kind of wheel system instead of walking on two legs.

“I can prepare dinner to your specifications,” it continued, awaiting an order from Billy. “Or answer any questions you may have.”

“Just one, bot,” Billy wasn’t in the mood to be polite to a machine. “How did my mate and I end up in here?”

“You were brought in by Mr. Wendell’s men, and laid upon the bed,” the robot dutifully replied. “First you then the other. The men were ever so gentle. The entire process was supervised by myself to ensure your maximum comfort and safety.”

“Yeah? And why do you care about our safety?”

“I am your personal Galation Five Thirteen,” it replied. “I am here to serve you.”

Billy snorted as he walked out of the larder. “Fine. Serve us something to eat before we go. My mate is hungry.”

“Very well, sir. Anything in particular he is hungry for?”

“Whatever you like. So long as it’s not poisoned.” Billy tossed the water ladle to the floor as he walked out.

The automaton responded as it went about assembling a plate of food, speaking to no one in particular. “Of course not, sir. To bring food that was poisoned would be neither safe nor comfortable, and therefore a violation of my programming.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Dathan's appetite was immense, and he devoured everything the serving bot brought over. Billy nibbled a bit, and watching him in astonishment as Dathan packed away food like he hadn't seen decent food in eons.

"I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm so bloody hungry," Dathan said as he bit into a cold joint of roasted lamb. "It's like I haven't eaten for weeks."

Billy shrugged. "It makes sense," he said. "I've seen firsthand how big you can get. Eat up."

Dathan felt his strength increase with every bite. He looked up to the tops of the walls, and then back down to Billy. He then looked side to side as he chewed.

"Are we going to be okay to fly out of here?" Billy asked. "Those walls aren't that high, are they?"

"The height is no problem," Dathan replied. "I could get us up there in five seconds. It's more about the length."

"The length?" Billy asked, his confusion showing.

"I've only ever launched into flight from a running start. To simply spread my wings and 'lift off'... I don't know, Billy. I've never tried it before. It's an awful lot of weight to get up into the air. I don't know if my wings will be able to handle it."

Billy stood up and went to the bars, trying to pull them apart with his bare hands. Dathan marveled at the immense strength and incredible flex of his mate's arm, chest, and back muscles. But despite the show, it was all in vain. The bars wouldn't budge.

"Those bars run as far down into the ground as up above it, I'll bet," Dathan said. "Impossible to bend, even with the strength of twenty heroes."

Billy held on to the bars and leaned back, stretching his muscles. Dathan came to his side and rubbed his shoulders.

“Why would Wendell hire you, then lock us up in a fully stocked cage, treating us like honored guests, providing everything we could want? The food is exceptional. The mattress is extremely comfortable, and the highest quality money can buy. A servant to look after our every need. It doesn’t make sense, Billy.”

“I don’t know, Dathan. I’d ask him myself, but I’d really rather not be here when he shows up. At least not inside here.”

Billy’s next efforts were to try and climb up the bars. Another show Dathan could appreciate, although as ineffective as trying to bend them. When Billy got to the steel panels, he used the rivets as purchase for his fingertips and toes. He managed to get a few feet up them before his hands gave out, and he dropped back down to the floor.

“If you can fly us out of here,” Billy said as he was catching his breath, “then we can get the jump on him when he shows up, which I reckon he will soon enough.”

“Oh?” Dathan couldn’t help but look alarmed at this.

“He fashioned the drug that those little metallic bugs stuck into us, so he’d know how long we’d be out for,” Billy explained. “He would give us a bit of time to get lazy, comfortable, eating his food and drinking his spirits. The only thing he wasn’t banking on was that one of us could fly. And that’s exactly what one of us is going to do.”

Dathan felt a sudden chill of fear race through his blood. “One of us?”

Billy pushed the bed aside and counted out steps as he walked across the floor. “Without the bed there, you’ll have about twenty yards to launch. I don’t know much about flying myself, but I do know that however hard it’s going to be for you, it will be impossible if I’m on your back. Without me there, you might stand a chance.”

Dathan looked across the expanse of the room and up to the top of the walls. “I don’t know, Billy. It’s awfully tight.”

Billy smiled and kissed him. "I like things nice and tight, baby."

Dathan blushed and nuzzled his head into Billy's chest.

"It's our only chance," Billy insisted. "I believe in you, my love. You're stronger than you think."

Dathan laid his hand on Billy's cheek. "Thank you, but..."

"But?"

"... what happens if you're right?"

Billy looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"What if I get airborne and fly out the top of this thing? What then? It's not like I can walk up to the front door and open it for you from the outside. You'll still be stuck in here. And there won't be anything I can do to change that from out there."

Dathan's voice was pitched a bit higher as he spoke. The thought of being separated from Billy was terrifying him. Billy raised his hands in an attempt to calm his mate down.

"Whoa, babe. Let's just solve one problem at a time. Once you're out, you can go for help, or get a rope, or some dynamite. Anything!"

"From where? How long will that take?" Dathan felt like his voice was about to crack. "I don't even know where we are. Do you? And if I leave you here, alone, what if Wendell comes back while I'm gone? You'll be a sitting duck for him. Defenseless."

Billy pressed his hands down on Dathan's shoulders. "I can take care of myself. Besides, we'll both be sitting ducks if we don't do something. It's too risky not to try it."

Dathan shook his head and sat defiantly on the bed. "I won't leave you. I can't. We're fated mates, together forever. We can't just split apart, not even under the most desperate circumstances. You might as well ask me not to breathe while you strangle yourself. I won't do it."

Billy nodded slowly. “Okay. You’re right. I wouldn’t be happy with you out there alone either. What if something happened to you? I just don’t know what else to do. I’m really trying to find a solution to this, Dathan.”

Dathan stood up and kissed him long and full. “Then let’s keep searching, my beautiful man. That is what you do best, isn’t it? Search for things?”

“But what if... what if there is no solution?”

Dathan kissed him again. “Then I have all I need, all I ever wanted right here in my arms. We’ll deal with Wendell or whatever happens next, but we’ll deal with it together. In the meantime, there’s plenty of food and drink for us to live quite well in whatever time we have left.”

Billy hugged his mate one more time before breaking free. Dathan watched as he walked across to the center of the room and looked up, his lips moving in a silent, and presumably endless quest to work out a solution. Billy didn’t strike Dathan as the type of man who’d give up easily.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Billy knew that Dathan was absolutely right. They wouldn't last long being separated. But he wasn't about to watch his beloved fall prey to whatever Wendell had in store for him.

He'd been thinking it through since Dathan told him that Wendell lied about the stolen horse. What if hiring him had been part of an elaborate plan to find a horse shifter? They weren't that common, and if Wendell was in need of one, he'd go to whatever length he could to obtain it. Which would explain him paying far more for Billy's time than was warranted, and why he wouldn't take no for an answer when Billy said it.

Billy reviewed the facts as he knew them while standing in the middle of the room. If he could distract himself with a new problem while stuck on an old one, his brain would search in the background and find a crack somewhere. So while he pretended to figure out a way to get them both out of this cage, he sought the reason why they were there in the first place.

Oliver Wendell's father died and left his empire to his son. Maybe the younger man killed his father in order to make it all happen. Billy wouldn't put it past him. Not now.

The younger Wendell, the Third, dreams up a story about a stolen horse, and seeks out the finest Searcher available to go looking for it, paying him a crazy amount of money in the process.

Why? To keep that Searcher distracted.

But distracted from what? From the fact that young wolf shifters were being drained of their life force, immobilized in the process? Wendell and Dathan's uncle, the Police Commissioner, were tight friends. Settembrini, also part of that group, had his daughter go missing. Maybe it was a mistake on Wendell's part, or maybe he was going to take Lana that first night but spared her once he found out who her father was. Once he learned that Billy was the one searching

for her, he needed to distract the Searcher with an offer impossible to refuse.

Okay, Billy. That all makes sense.

Obviously Wendell needed the blood of shifters, and the wolves weren't cutting it for him anymore. Besides, teenage wolves were small. Abundant, yes, but there's wasn't much blood there. Not as much as there is in, say, a much larger beast. Like a horse. Billy didn't know the specifics, but the logic made sense in his brain, so he figured it would in Wendell's too.

So, Wendell is after Dathan. He must have been told Dathan was a horse shifter by his uncle. That back-stabbing Commissioner would sell out his own mother if it meant getting a few hundred votes. And the Commissioner hates the thought that his nephew is a shifter – Dathan confirmed that with his story about having to hide who he was, and how he'd never told anyone about his magnificent wings. Billy's thoughts were racing now as random pieces of the puzzle started slotting together.

He looked over at his fated mate and felt a surge of protective energy. He would do anything to keep Dathan safe. Hell, he'd pick him up and leap over the damn walls himself if he could.

Billy suddenly lit up inside. Just as he hoped, the problem unlocked itself while he was trying to unravel a different one.

"I've got it!" He called to Dathan.

His mate stood up, a few crumbs of cheddar and biscuit falling away from his mouth.

"I'm sorry, I just can't stop, Billy," Dathan confessed with a mouthful of cheese.

"It's not your fault. Wendell must have put something in your drug that's making you want to eat. He has his reasons, I'm sure, but we won't be sticking around long enough to find out. I know how to get us both out of here."

He walked Dathan through his idea. When finished, his mate had a few questions.

“Let me get this straight. You’re planning to pick me up, an adult horse, hold me above your head and then... jump?”

“Leap, more like,” Billy corrected. “If I can get us both up high enough, you can start flapping your wings and catch sufficient air to stay aloft. I’ll hold on to your feet, just long enough for you to clear the top of the walls. Then I’ll let go, and fall down on the other side.”

Dathan looked up with skepticism and fear. “That’s a forty foot drop, Billy. You’ll break your neck.”

“I’ve survived much worse.”

“Okay,” Dathan still didn’t look sure. “And then?”

“Then you swoop on down, I hop on your back, and we get out of here faster than a speeding bullet. We then drop in on our friend Oliver Wendell before he drops in on us.”

Before Dathan could raise another question, Billy stopped his speech with a forceful kiss. “Go shift and spread those beautiful wings of yours. Hopefully you didn’t eat too much this afternoon.”

Billy led Dathan to the corner of the cell, and set up the screen for him. “I know you like your privacy.”

He went back to the center of the room and focused his strength and energy on the strenuous task that awaited him. A moment later, he heard Dathan whinny. He walked back to the corner of the room and crouched underneath the horse’s belly.

“I trust your abs in this state are as solid as they are when you’re a man. I hope this isn’t too unpleasant for you.”

Dathan nudged him once on the shoulder.

“See you on the other side, my love,” Billy said with all the confidence he could muster.

Dathan spread his wings and began to flap them vigorously. Anything that wasn’t bolted down in the cell was soon caught

up and flying about the space. The bot was frantically rolling around trying to collect things as the wind from Dathan's wings created a mini hurricane.

Billy placed his hands on his mate's mighty stomach. He took three deep invigorating breaths, crouched low, sent all his energy and focus to his legs then leapt into the air. Forward and up, as if throwing a boulder across a great divide, but then hanging on to it as it launched.

It wasn't easy, but it was working! Billy could hardly believe it himself. He shouted out encouragement to Dathan, hearing his mate grunt and scream with tremendous effort to try and get as much wind beneath his wings as possible.

Between the two of them moaning and exerting energy, along with the sound of the wind, their prison became a deafening echo chamber. Billy clung to Dathan's hind legs, taking care not to get in the way of his mate's wings. It was slow, torturous, and Billy hated seeing his mate so incredibly strained, but it was working. As he watched, the floor below them was getting further and further away.

When he could reach the top of the walls with his feet, Billy swung himself as best he could, letting go of Dathan's legs, trying to balance on the steel bar that ran around the top. He lost his footing almost immediately, and for a moment his heart was in his mouth. But by throwing his weight sideways, Billy made sure his fall was going to be on the outside of his prison, not the inside.

Which was a good thing because before he'd fallen too far, his blessed horse appeared underneath him and Billy landed with a thump on his mate's wide back. Still breathing heavily, he leaned over Dathan's neck as the horse flew higher – putting as much distance between them and the prison as he could.

Dathan was heading for the city and Billy's last glimpse of the inside of their prison walls was of the bot running around trying to put everything back in its place. *I wonder what Wendell is going to think of that if he turns up?*

Chapter Twenty-Six

They arrived at Charlotte and William's grand townhouse on the upper side of the city just as Tottie was finishing her dinner. She was dining alone, as was often the case, her husband frequently staying late at the precinct during the week dealing with a never-ending workday.

"I'll inform Madam Charlotte that you are here, Master Dathan. As well as your..."

"My mate. Billy Hipp. Tottie has met him before, Jules."

"Of course, sir."

"And make it quick, please. We have pressing matters to discuss with her."

The butler disappeared behind a set of double doors which closed automatically behind him. Billy wandered up and down, taking in the austerity on display.

"Aunt Tottie decorated it herself," Dathan commented. "She has the entire interior design overhauled every two of three years, trying to keep up with the latest trend."

"Must be exhausting," Billy said.

"I'm going to dash upstairs to my old room to change quickly," Dathan announced. He hadn't had a chance to refresh his wardrobe after his latest shift. "Make yourself comfortable, babe. I won't be a minute."

Billy nodded as Dathan bounded up the stairs, taking them three at a time. He continued to look around. There was a door to a kitchen beyond the stairs. He nudged it open, and the smells of sizzling beef fat, tarragon, and lemon wafted through. Another door to the right led into a powder room. A third further down was a staircase that led to the cellar.

Around the other side of the grand stairwell, Billy found three sepia toned photographs, each encased in an ornate steel frame and hung upon the wall. The first one showed a young couple

with a baby in the mother's arms. She looked like Charlotte, but Billy couldn't be sure.

"That's my parents and me," Dathan said as he climbed down the stairs. "I was just a little baby in my mother's arms."

Billy turned around to his mate descend. Dathan was dressed in a clean white shirt, dark pants, and a fantastic pair of black leather suspenders, complete with shoulder braces and large brass rings connectors. The buckles were made of polished brass.

"You look killer," Billy said. "Love the suspenders."

Dathan gave him a kiss. "Hope you weren't too bored waiting for me."

"Been poking around. I thought this photo was your aunt Charlotte for sure."

"My mom was her sister. They were pretty close in age, and about the same build. My parents died shortly after that photo was taken."

Billy reached out for Dathan's hand and gave it a squeeze.

"The second photo is my aunt and uncle on one of their anniversaries. I would have been about ten or so and didn't want to be part of the photographer's session. They took so long and that flash blowing up always scared me."

"I don't like it much myself," Billy said.

"That third one is about a year old. Taken at the Police Precinct after Uncle William had the pneumatic tubes installed."

Billy leaned in closer. "That's your uncle, your aunt, and the fellow in between the two of them... I can't quiet make out, but I'm willing to bet it's..."

"Oliver Wendell," a voice interrupted. "The Second."

Dathan and Billy turned around to discover Charlotte standing on the threshold to the library, the double doors having opened silently while they were studying the photo.

“He was the genius behind the upgrade at your Uncle’s precinct,” she added.

“My eyes aren’t what they used to be,” Billy said with a smile, “but he looks like the spitting image of his son.”

“Oh he is,” Charlotte replied. “In fact, the father’s youthful appearance caused many to assume he and his son were brothers close together in age.”

Dathan nodded in agreement. “It’s true. I was at Wendell’s funeral. Open casket and everything. His son was there and the two of them looked an awful lot alike. Only one was dead and the other was in mourning.”

“Enough talk about the dead. Let’s change the subject, shall we?” Charlotte spread her arms wide and embraced her nephew, kissing him on both cheeks. “Dathan darling, how lovely to see you. You should have let me know you were coming. I would have had Jules place extra settings for dinner.”

“We didn’t know we were coming, Aunt Tottie. I’m afraid it’s been a day filled with surprises all around, not all of them pleasant.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened at his words. “Oh dear. Sounds positively mysterious. Come, sit with me in the library and tell all. Don’t leave out a single detail.” She gave a hug and double kiss to Billy as well. “You too, Mr. Hipp. Wherever Dathan goes you’re sure to follow.”

“Like a dog,” Billy quipped as they all crossed into the library, the double doors closing soundlessly behind them.

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“Who did this to you, my dear?”

Dathan had just finished filling in his aunt on the events that had taken place since early that morning. He shared everything except details about their escape from the prison in the woods. He wasn’t ready to disclose the fact that his horse could fly. Not yet.

“I have reason to believe...” Billy began to say.

“Strong reason,” Dathan added.

“Strong reason to believe it was none other than young Oliver Wendell. Son to the man in your photograph.”

Charlotte’s reaction was that of genuine shock. She produced a delicate black fan from the inside of her corset - held there by a magnetic clip system - flicked it open, and began fanning herself in one smooth movement. Her cleaved bosom, freshly powdered and adorned with a necklace of brass cogs and gears, rose and fell with every breath.

“Wendell?” she gasped. “Why on earth would he be interested in taking you and Billy prisoner?”

Dathan looked at Billy. “Tell her what you told me, Billy. We can trust her.”

Billy nodded once and turned to Charlotte. “I think Wendell is behind the ongoing disappearance and... alteration... of all the young shifters in the city. He’s performing some kind of procedure on them, involving a needle and the extraction of their blood.”

“How utterly disturbing.” Tottie’s face paled even further. Dathan took her hand.

“Whatever he’s doing to them, and why he’s doing it, I don’t understand yet. But I do know that it leaves them forever changed.”

“Changed?” Charlotte tilted her head and squinted her eyes. “How do you mean ‘changed’?”

“They’re...” Dathan attempted to explain but had to catch his breath. “They’re unable to shift afterwards, Auntie. It’s horrible.”

“Oh my dear,” she gasped as she brought her free hand up to her mouth in shock. “How very, very horrid.” She turned to Billy. “I may not be the strongest advocate for those people who live in two forms, but I wouldn’t wish them any harm.”

She squeezed Dathan's hand, then turned back to Billy. "My sister, Dathan's mother, was able to shift. I was not."

"What?" Dathan cried. "My mother was a shifter? You never told me that."

"The family didn't want it known, darling. It was not uncommon to hide such things amongst certain members of high society." She turned back to Billy. "When we found out that our darling nephew was one of them, it was a difficult truth to accept. Both for his uncle and myself. Regardless, I couldn't imagine Dathan losing the ability to shift altogether. It would be nothing short of tragic."

Billy nodded and placed his hand on Dathan's shoulders. "I think that's what Wendell had in mind when he captured us. A horse shifter is a bit rarer, and considerably more substantial, than a wolf or cat. I think he was after your nephew's blood."

"Blood?"

"Life force. But thankfully we were able to get away before any real harm could come to him."

Charlotte stifled a sob and Dathan wrapped his arms around her.

"Thank goodness you were there to help him," she said to Billy.

"We helped each other, Aunty. We're together in this. In everything now." Dathan nodded a smile to Billy as he said this. "But we'll need your help."

Charlotte dried her eyes, the finely executed black mascara and liner remained perfectly preserved. "Whatever you need. Just name it."

"Tell your husband, Miss Charlotte," Billy answered. "Tell him what we've just told you and have him send the posse to Wendell's studio and estate. We'll meet him there."

"Wendell? If he's the madman you say he is, then please don't go. It's not safe."

Dathan stood up and took his place beside Billy. “Wendell doesn’t know that we’re on to him. Besides, as far as he’s concerned, Billy here is working for him. Just tell Uncle William right away and be sure he sends his men out immediately.”

“I will,” Charlotte said as she nodded vigorously. “I promise.”

As the two were taking their leave, Charlotte grabbed Billy by the sleeve and pulled him close. “Take care of my Dathan. Don’t let anything happen to him, do you understand?”

Billy smiled reassuringly, then looked at his mate.

“What can I say? She loves me to bits.” Dathan said.

“That makes two of us,” Billy said as the double doors parted before them.

Jules was there, holding the front entrance open for them. They slipped into the night and down the steps of the grand townhouse, heading north of the city limits towards the Wendell estate.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Oliver Wendell Estate and Studio was chock-a-block with inventions, creations, innovations, and experiments. It made Billy's skin crawl. It was also curiously quiet, with not a guard or a servant in sight. Gaining access was easy, and that should've been a huge red flag to Billy from the start, but Dathan was still understandably incensed with what Oliver had wanted to do with him, and was determined to find some answers.

The two of them quietly scoped the place out. Billy had his pistol drawn as he investigated the various warehouse-sized rooms, each filled with curios of all shapes and sizes imaginable. Even a few of the unimaginable type.

"This is incredible," Dathan whispered. Billy could tell that his mate was impressed with the scope of the collection, despite the evil that lurked in the heart of the inventor. "A lifetime of work, all here and on display."

Various automaton pieces lined a number of shelves. Heads, arms, legs, and other body parts sat disconnected, while wigs of human-like hair sat in bundles, bound by thread. The bundles were likely human hair, Billy thought, purchased from young women over the ages eager to sell their locks for cash. Fabricated eyeballs of every color spilled out of countless boxes.

Earlier inventions, those of the clockwork wind-up variety, gathered dust in one wing of the studio. Machines built for every possible task - washing linens, toasting bread, popping corn, pressing shirts - sat neglected in another wing.

A third room was considerably more 'alive' for Billy, and the sounds that met them as they walked inside landed with familiar comfort. Birds chirping, cats meowing, and dogs whimpering, and barking were all housed behind bars in cages of various shapes and sizes.

"Quite the collection of beasts," Billy said to Dathan. "I wonder what they're all for?"

“I’m not sure,” Dathan whispered back, “but their cages are all spotlessly clean and generously roomy. There’s an entire dog run inside this room alone.”

Billy’s attention was caught by something instantly recognizable, even for one with limited vision.

“Look,” he said, pointing to a corner on the other side of the vast room. “Look familiar?”

It did. It was a large bird cage built in the exact same style as the one they were recently locked up in. The bars with sporadic squares of metal plating that came together on the top to form an enclosure; a large ‘bed’ in the center; a spot on one side for eating, another on the other side for the birds to do their ‘business’. All meticulously maintained, cleaned, and comfortable.

“These birds wouldn’t have it so great in the wild,” Billy noted. “They may be caged, but their every need is tended to, and they’re protected from predators. Not a bad life, wouldn’t you say, Dathan?”

When there was no answer, Billy turned around to find his mate transfixed by one of the birds in the cage.

“Dathan?”

It was a large bald eagle, as fascinated by Dathan as he was by it. The two just stared at one another, oblivious to the rest of the world around them.

“What is it, babe?” Billy asked.

“I don’t know,” Dathan whispered, unable to take his eyes off the creature in the cage, “but it feels like the two of us know each other.”

“Know each other? You and a bald eagle?”

“I can’t explain it. It’s just a feeling. Kinda like the feeling I had when you were in the viewing room at the precinct. Like I’ve just found part of myself.”

Billy didn't quite know what to make of Dathan's response. "Well, that bird seems to feel the same way. It looks like it wants you to let it out or to bring you in or meet in the middle somewhere. I'd like to help but it's trapped like you and I were, in a cage with no door."

Billy continued to search the animal room, leaving Dathan to commune with the bird.

In the center of the room was a large structure concealed with a tarp. Billy was curious about what was hidden underneath. Nothing else in the vast studio was covered up. Curiosity getting the better of him, he lifted a corner of the canvas sheet. At least, he tried to look underneath but there was no light at all. The wing of the studio they were in was illuminated by glowing lanterns positioned high up on the walls near the ceiling. He hadn't noticed the artificial light until that moment.

As he set the corner of the canvas down again, he could have sworn whatever was hiding underneath it began to move. Billy took a step back. Was he imagining the movement? Out of the corner of his blurry eye, another part of it moved again. Billy stepped back once more. This time he was sure it wasn't his imagination.

"Dathan. Come check this out."

In that moment, his words were drowned out by the sound of a thousand cogs and wheels turning. Whatever was under the canvas creaked and moaned as it came to life. The dogs and cats all started howling in their cages, and ran off to hide.

A long metal tail emerged from under one end of the covering, and slowly moved around as if investigating. Billy couldn't quite make out what was on the end of it, but it didn't strike him as a tail at all. He could have sworn it was a snake.

Sure enough, he saw its jaws open wide. The bright light reflected off what he assumed was a mouthful of sharp, metal teeth. Billy stood his ground and waited. The snake, if that's what it was, wasn't after him. The mouth, wide open, came

around to the center of the canvas covering, and closed its jaws on the material. Then, in one grand swooping move, yanked the canvas cover off entirely and threw it across the vast room.

Billy couldn't believe what he saw before him.

A colossal monster, larger than life, fashioned entirely out of brass and steel, moved with jerky, mechanical motions as it sat upon an enormous plinth. Billy didn't need to rely on his cloudy vision to know exactly what it looked like: a crude mashup hybrid beast with a wolf in the front and serpent on the back.

It had been thousands of years and a world away, but Billy was standing before the mechanical replica of a familiar monster.

One that he had killed so very long ago.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dathan turned away from the bird cage when he heard his mate shouting.

“Climb off there nice and slow, Wendell,” Billy was yelling. “Keep your hands where I can see them.”

He was pointing his gun at someone sitting atop a large steel animal. All Dathan could see was the rider’s back, but noted the fine cut of the jacket right away.

“Blind Billy Hipp,” Wendell called. “It’s about time you showed up. I’ve been waiting days to see you.”

“You’ve been doing more than just waiting, Wendell,” Dathan announced as he came around from the bird cage. “We found Lana in the park, left for dead.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I said climb down,” Billy repeated, his gun steady and pointed directly at Wendell’s chest. “Do it now.”

“Very well,” Wendell said, “but I must say this is hardly the way to treat your employer. Not good for business.”

As Wendell was about to swing his leg over from the side, he engaged a small lever with his foot. The wolf’s head turned towards the Searcher. It opened its mouth as if to roar just as Billy’s gun flew out of his hand and into the beast’s steel jaws.

“Powerful force, magnetism,” Wendell announced as he resettled on the machine’s back, reaching down to obtain the gun from its mouth. “But you’d know all about that, Billy, wouldn’t you? Those eyes of yours attract attention wherever you go. Shame they’re not entirely functional or else I’m sure you would have seen the lever beside my foot just now. Oh well. They look great even if they don’t see great.”

Dathan charged forward to tackle Wendell off the back of the mechanical beast, but the machine seemed to have a mind of its own. With barely a move from the inventor, the dragon end

swung around with its serpentine head, knocking Dathan to the floor instantly. Billy ran to him.

“Dathan!”

Dathan sat up and shook his head as Billy crouched over him. He was rattled, and he could feel a welt forming on his forehead, but he had worse things to worry about than a sore head.

Billy stood up to attack, just as the serpent’s head swung around again. Billy, knowing it was coming this time, easily caught it with both hands and tried to wrestle it to the ground. While his back was turned, focusing on the hind end of the beast, the front end spun around, reared up, and came down with both metal paws on Billy’s back. He was easily pressed to the floor, as Wendell laughed from the monster’s back.

“Ha ha! It’s really touching how the two of you look out for each other. I guess that’s what love does to the mind. Stops it from thinking clearly.”

Dathan could see that Billy was about to try again, but took Wendell’s words to heart and grabbed his mate’s arm, holding him back. They weren’t thinking clearly. The machine, operating on some kind of mysterious power source, was much stronger and faster than both of them combined. They would not defeat it with strength alone.

“Good to see one of you is looking before leaping. Leave it to the one with perfect vision.”

Wendell removed his black top hat and the round tinted spectacles from his eyes.

“Master Dathan, I presume? You’re much more handsome in person than from the other side of a two-way mirror. You’ve grown into a fine young man. A real stud, if I’m not mistaken.”

Dathan bit his lip and took deep, calming breaths as he tried to remain cool. “I’d say the same about you, but you haven’t grown into a man yet at all. Fine or otherwise. Just how old are you anyway?”

Wendell laughed as he leaned forward on his mount, as if he were just out on a pleasant joy ride and had run into an old friend on the trail. “Now that’s a very good question, Master Dathan, to which I’m afraid I don’t have a very good answer.”

“Seventeen, I reckon,” Billy said. “Just a boy.”

“Playing with all his daddy’s toys,” Dathan added. “Your father was a great man. I’m sure he’d be thoroughly disgusted with your behavior if he were alive to see it.”

Dathan may not be able to physically best the mechanical creature which Wendell controlled, but he was good at killing time. If he was able to keep Wendell talking long enough, the police should arrive soon enough.

“My father.” Wendell nodded as he looked off into the distance, possibly untangling a memory. “Honestly it’s been so long, I really don’t remember him at all. He wasn’t around much at the best of times. I’m afraid we’ve lost touch.”

Billy shook his head in disgust. “Your father only died a few months ago,” he said. “My personal theory is that you killed him in order to hasten your inheritance. A deplorable thing, to kill one’s father, but it’s not the first time such deplorable things have happened in this world. That’s your own demon to wrestle with.”

“I appreciate the blessing, Blind Billy.”

“... what I find truly disgusting and unforgivable, however...” Billy continued, “is that you would deny that you even knew him. Nothing to be gained by damaging a great man’s reputation after you’ve put him in the ground.”

“Agreed,” Dathan added.

Wendell was nodding enthusiastically to everything Billy was saying. “I couldn’t agree more,” he said. “Honor thy father is a commandment I respect and admire.”

“So what are you playing at then?” Billy demanded to know.

Wendell just shrugged. Dathan could see he was enjoying this. *Perfect*, he thought, *so long as he keeps talking*. Then the

penny dropped.

“His father’s not dead,” Dathan suddenly announced.

Billy looked over to his mate with a confused look in his eyes. “How do you figure? I thought you attended the funeral? Open casket and everything, you said?”

“True,” he said. “But what if the body in the casket was one of his inventions?”

“What if...?” Billy replied. “Where’s old man Wendell then?”

Dathan nodded up to the man sitting above them on the elaborate machine. “Right there. Not only did the father not die, but the son was never born.”

Dathan lifted his focus to Wendell, meeting his eyes and challenging him with the truth.

“Am I right, Oliver Wendell?”

“The second?” Billy asked in a search for clarity.

“The only, I’d say,” was his mate’s response. Dathan took some satisfaction when Wendell nodded his agreement.

“Well done, Master Sleuth. You’d have made a fine detective on your uncle’s police force.”

Dathan, ever the gentleman, tipped his head in acknowledgment. *Who will be here any moment to take you away*, he thought or at least he hoped. *You’re taking your sweet time about it, uncle.*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Billy stood up slowly, making sure to not spook the robot, and walked around it. Both ends followed Billy with their glass and brass eyes, ready to pounce if an attack was forthcoming.

“Be careful, my love,” Dathan quietly whispered.

“Oh, he’s careful enough,” Wendell answered. “My creation here will not attack unless I tell it to. So as long as your boyfriend remains strictly in observational mode, he is safe.”

Billy was looking over the manufactured animal, trying to find vulnerabilities in its design. There would be no defeating Wendell without bringing the beast down, not even with the entire police force at his side. He would have to approach the problem strategically, and observation was the first step in that process. Unfortunately, everything about the machine appeared as a blur of steel, rivets, gauges, and springs. There likely was a weak spot, but he was hard pressed to discover it on his own.

“Since I’m still on your payroll,” Billy asked casually, “any chance you could advance me a pair of those fancy goggles you showed me before?”

Wendell let fly a resounding laugh. “I’m afraid our contract was voided the moment you pulled a gun on me, Billy Hipp. Besides, it’s in my best interests to keep you blind and in the dark going forward.”

“Partially blind,” Billy corrected him. “I supposed you’ll want your five hundred dollar advance back, then? Happy to slip out with Dathan and withdraw it from the bank first thing in the morning. With interest.”

“I appreciate your sense of humor, Billy Hipp. Truly I do. Makes you all the more attractive.”

Billy glanced over to Dathan, who was watching his every move. He winked once to give his mate a signal that what he was about to say was all part of plan, and hoped that Dathan would pick up and play along.

“That’s twice now, since we’ve been your captive audience here, that you’ve mentioned my attractive qualities,” Billy replied. “Maybe I overlooked how handsome and available you are. Now that I know you’re not a child... well, let’s just say that changes things somewhat.”

Wendell was momentarily caught by Billy’s charms. The Searcher could see a flash of possibility jolt through Oliver’s body.

“That’s quite the offer, Billy. But aren’t the two of you forever bound to each other? Claimed and devoted as fated mates?”

“Oh we are, make no mistake,” Billy said. “But I don’t think that rules out the possibility of a threesome. Wouldn’t you agree, Dathan darling?”

Dathan cleared his throat and sat up on his haunches. Billy hated that he had to resort to doing this, but if it helped to further their end, then it would be worth it.

“Uhm, yes. Of course. A threesome. I’m entirely up for that.”

Billy smiled at Wendell and flashed his icy blues up at him. “What do you say, Oliver? Feel like riding something a bit more accommodating than all that metal?”

Oliver looked at Dathan. “Would you shift into your horse for me? I’ve always wanted to...”

“Of course he would,” Billy replied before Dathan could refuse. “We’re your prisoners, so feel free to use us as you wish.”

Dathan nodded slowly, throwing dirty looks in Billy’s direction. But they were looks Oliver couldn’t see. “Of course I would,” he said.

Billy sensed that Oliver was getting very hot and bothered. *Maybe he is seventeen after all*, Billy wondered, *and thinking solely with his prick?* The seduction ploy was happening much easier than he ever would have thought.

“Come on down,” Billy said as he extended his hand. Oliver hesitated a moment, looked once more at Dathan, back to

Billy, then began to reach out and take Billy up on his offer.

In the last moment, the wolf snapped his jaws at Billy's forearm. The Searcher just managed to pull it away in time as the razor sharp teeth came down.

Wendell sat back up with a sudden thrust. He shifted his weight and narrowed his eyes at Billy. "Like I said, my little pet here knows the difference between a threat and a promise. Even if I turn to jelly when you bat your baby blues, she stays alert."

"She?" Billy asked.

"Yes," Wendell replied. "I may not remember my father much at all, but I was very close to my mother. She died when I was quite young, but I've never forgotten her. I built this in honor of her."

Billy knew his seduction tactic likely wouldn't have fully worked, but it managed to yank down his enemy's defenses, if not his pants. He was on an information hunt and was getting more and more of it every minute. The creature seemed to act on its own instincts as well as at the control of its owner. Her owner. Whatever. But how?

"She's quite the creation, Mr. Wendell," Billy said, "I have to say. Must have taken you a lifetime to put her together. It's almost as if she's alive."

"She is alive," Wendell snapped. "In her own way."

"I wonder how that is? It's only a collection of springs and cogs and sheet metal and rivets, as far as I can see."

"Well, we all know how far you can see, which isn't very far at all. And she's greater than the sum of her parts, I can promise you that."

"Clearly," Billy replied. "I can't imagine the complexity of what's going on underneath it all. Something magical I'd say. As if she had a life force flowing through her veins."

Wendell patted the creature tenderly on its wolf side, along the neck, as if it were a horse.

“She has some fluid pumped through her, yes.”

“Oil, is it? Some lubricant to keep every little part moving smoothly and to prevent the wheels and bearings from seizing up?”

“Something like that,” Wendell said with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Or blood, maybe. They say it’s much thicker,” Billy added.

Wendell smiled broadly and spread his arms wide in a gesture as if to say, ‘you got me!’

“Guilty as charged,” he admitted, with a touch of pride. “I’ve experimented with the blood of a number of species over the decades - centuries, really - trying to find the perfect cocktail. Shifter blood has proved to be the most usable. Those that are only a few years out of adolescence are the best.”

“You insane, heartless bastard.” Dathan was on his feet now. Both ends of the beast turned to him, ready to attack. “You have no idea the harm you’re causing.”

“*Au contraire*, Master Dathan,” Wendell said as he turned to him. “I have every idea of the harm. *C’est la vie*, my good man, *c’est la vie*. Such is life. Theirs for my baby’s. It’s a fair trade. One which you will get to experience firsthand in a matter of moments.”

Billy’s suspicions were confirmed: Wendell was after Dathan’s blood. As much as it turned his stomach to be proven right, he could now rule out guessing Wendell’s motives. *Now, how to stop him*. That wasn’t going to be easy.

Chapter Thirty

Whatever fear Dathan felt at that moment was overpowered by his anger towards the monster atop a monster. He was working overtime to keep his cool, doing everything he could from leaping once more and ripping Wendell's head off.

Where was the calvary? Dathan wondered. They're sure as shit taking their sweet time to get here.

He squared his shoulders, flexed his chest, and calmly smiled. If nothing else, he would exemplify the quality of 'grace under pressure'. Whatever it took to keep Wendell talking.

"I'm flattered that you think I've got something exceptional coursing through my veins," he began, "but I'm afraid I'm nothing special. Just another horse shifter, ashamed his entire life to be fully himself."

Wendell licked his lips in a display of devious cunning. "But you are not just another run of the mill horse shifter, Master Dathan. That was your father. Not you."

Dathan's throat suddenly tensed. He wasn't expecting to hear his father brought up. It made projecting a calm persona all the more difficult. Only years of dealing with his uncle made it possible.

"My father? What do you know about my father?"

"Oh, a few things," Wendell was positively gleeful on top of his unbeatable monster. "He loved his darling little boy, first of all. And he was a fine man, a pillar of the community as they say. Trusted and admired by those in positions of power. Such as myself. And I did admire your father very much, but not for his accomplishments as a man."

Dathan's blood began to boil. "As what then?" He asked the question through gritted teeth. He could sense Billy trying to warn him against getting too emotionally ensnared, but he couldn't stop himself.

"A horse, of course!" Wendell burst out laughing. "Ha ha! I'm a poet and didn't even know it!"

Dathan felt as if he'd just been pounded in the gut by a thousand mechanical beasts. Billy was quick to his side, holding him up. Good thing too, else the news may have knocked him to the floor.

“Did you hear that, Billy? My father was a shifter. Like me.” A rush of love and pride surged through Dathan at the news.

“Like you, yes,” Wendell interjected, “but only to a certain extent. I was curious to know if the son surpassed the accomplishments of the father. Your daddy had his limitations and I wanted to know if you were bound by the same ones as well.”

Dathan looked at Billy as the whites of his eyes expanded. *Does he know?* Dathan mouthed. He turned back to Wendell.

“And?” He asked, doing his best to play it cool. “What did you find out?”

“Ever since you came of age, I did all I could, employed every gadget and device at my vast, limitless disposal to spy on you. Countless nights I followed you out of the city, to the seaboard or out amongst the moonlit meadows, observing you shift and run. For years I watched, but there was nothing exceptional, as you say, about you. As you grew older, you also became better at evading my curious eyes.”

Dathan allowed himself a shudder. “The thought of you watching me like some demented peeping Tom is enough to make my skin crawl.”

“I eventually grew bored of it all, and stopped. On to other things, I suppose. *C'est la vie*. Then a few months ago, at my non-father's non-funeral, something caught my eye. You were rolling your shoulder as you sat paying your respects. As if you were injured. Now why would a horse shifter as skilled and careful as yourself be nursing an injured limb? My curiosity was ignited once again, and I put a plan in motion to find out.”

Dathan thought back to the day of Wendell's funeral. He had been out for a long bout of flying that week, in the days

leading up to it. His shoulder was particularly tight that day, aggravated by all the sitting and standing that comes along with a grand funeral service.

“So you created a bullshit story about a stolen horse in order to... what? Lure me out of the woodwork once more?” Dathan spat his question out, having lost all patience and calmness in his voice.

“Partly, yes. I knew you would have been aware that Fountain had long ago left this earth...”

“... you tarnish that fine animal’s name by speaking it...”

“... but couldn’t help but wonder if you also knew that he was more than just a prize winning racehorse...”

Dathan’s heart froze in that moment. He gripped Billy’s shoulder for support as he straightened his spine. The truth hit him hard, arriving from deep within him instead of through his ears. Wendell didn’t need to say anything further because Dathan already knew.

“Fountain of Youth,” he whispered, barely audible in its trembling tone. “He was my father.”

“In the early days of my experimentation,” Wendell confessed, “I borrowed some of his blood when he was in his horse form. I didn’t know then that he would remain in that state. It was surprise to us both, to say the least.”

Dathan felt the rage along with the sorrow, both exploding from deep within him. He held on tight to Billy, who in turn supported his weight, lending him strength. To suddenly learn that his father was a shifter like himself was one thing, but to know that he had been alive and so close for so many years was more than he could stand.

“Why didn’t you let him know?” Billy spoke up on his mate’s behalf. “Dathan could’ve had a relationship with his father, and you could have easily kept your guilt in the matter out of it. You could have said you found him in horse form, that there was no explanation, that you were happy to keep him on the family’s behalf. Anything! And it would have given you better

access to observe Dathan, if that's what you were so hellbent on doing. They both would have benefited by it, and it would have been no skin off your shit-stained nose at all."

Wendell offered nothing in return. No reason. No explanation. No apology.

A long silence followed.

"If it's any consolation to you," Wendell finally said, "I treated him better than any horse has been treated before or since. I like to think he was happy, and died entirely of natural causes. I was devastated to see him go."

Dathan was too busy blinking away tears to fully clock Wendell's efforts at consoling him. He was ready to jump on the crazy inventor and rip him apart or die trying when a familiar voice sounded from outside the studio wing.

"Oliver Wendell!" The voice echoed across the vast room. "Is my nephew in there with you?"

Dathan's pent-up tension and emotional anxiety finally began to subside upon hearing his uncle's voice. And just in the nick of time.

At last!

Chapter Thirty-One

Billy instinctively reached for his pistol upon hearing the Police Commissioner's voice, then remembered he had been relieved of it earlier. It was on the floor, at the feet of the mechanical beast, guarded by the wolf end.

"Come in, my friends," Wendell replied. "Your nephew and his beautiful boyfriend are unarmed and entirely secured, just as I promised."

Just as I promised?

The hair on the back of Billy's neck began to tingle as his heart sank into his stomach.

We've been set up!

Charlotte entered first, her face a mess of tears, and ran straight to Dathan, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"Are you okay? Tell me you're okay!" she cried, then noticed the purple bruise on his forehead. "Oh my, you're hurt."

"It's nothing, Aunt Tottie, just a bruise. I'm okay. But where's..."

Behind her, walking casually as he puffed on a cigar, was Uncle William. The Police Commissioner sized up the room, including the bird cage and its inhabitants, before his eyes settled on Billy.

"Told you the battle was far from over, Billy Hipp," William said with a wink. "Ahhh, such is life, hey?"

"Yeah," Billy mumbled, "*c'est la fucking vie!*"

The Police Commissioner jumped back with exaggerated fear when he beheld the mechanical monster that Wendell was mounted upon.

"So this is what's been keeping you busy forever and day," he said as he reached to touch the side of the steel animal. The serpent's end reared around and snapped its jaws in a warning

at the Police Commissioner, who pulled his hand back with alarming speed.

“Sorry, William. Looky only. No touchy.” Wendell patted the flank of his machine to calm it down.

“That’s one helluva creation, Wendell. What do you call that thing?”

“Her name is Chimera,” Wendell replied proudly.

Billy’s ears pricked up, but he kept his body steady.

“Chimera?” William repeated as he blew cigar smoke into the air. “That means... what... illusion... doesn’t it? Something made up? What the hell kind of a name is that for your little pet?”

“The word has come to mean that today, yes,” Wendell agreed. “A chimera is anything hoped for but impossible to achieve. But the original word was the name of an actual being many years ago. I’ve built her in that being’s image. Blind Billy can tell you all about her,” Wendell added as he looked down to where the Searcher was trying to keep his face hidden. “Can’t you, Billy?”

William looked to the Searcher. Charlotte followed suit. Then Dathan.

“What’s he talking about, babe?” Dathan asked.

Billy’s eyes were burning from the cigar smoke. He rubbed them and felt the damp tears on his fingers. The last thing he wanted anyone to think was that he was crying over any of this.

“The monster I killed once upon a time,” he said, primarily to Dathan, but noticed that everyone else hung upon his words. “It was known as the Chimera. A ferocious creature with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the asshole of a snake. A hideous hybrid incapable of love. One that had no business being alive in the first place. All it could do was spread its ugliness to everyone around it.”

Wendell's lips were pursed in anger, Billy could tell. He had heard rumors that the beast had a child, but no one ever saw such an offspring, so Billy chalked it up to one of the thousands of stories that were swirling around back then, each taking on a life of its own.

"You killed her, just for the glory of it." Wendell was trembling as he spoke, his rage palpable across the room.

"Yeah, I guess it kinda sucks when someone kills another person's parent, even if it was for a good reason." Billy was quick to turn the tables on Wendell by pointing the finger back at him.

"I didn't kill Dathan's father," Wendell snapped back. "I told you, he lived to a good age and was treated like a king."

"And what about my mother?" Dathan asked. "You killed her."

Wendell shook his head in vigorous denial. "I did not."

"Then where is she?" Dathan demanded. "What happened to her?"

Billy stole a glance at Charlotte. She too was eager to hear what happened to her sister. Her eyes, all eyes in fact, were turned towards Wendell.

"I confess to experimenting on her as well," Wendell reluctantly explained, "trying to find the right combination of life force. She was a shifter, as Charlotte here will confirm, and my early attempts resulted in locking her as well into her other form."

"A bird." William said with a shrug. "What's the big deal?"

"Not just any bird," Charlotte added, "but the most stately among them."

Dathan stood and walked back to the cage as if in a trance. "A bald eagle," he whispered, just as the magnificent bird of prey flew out of the shadows, landing majestically on a perch behind the bars.

Charlotte walked slowly to the cage as well. She stood beside it in silence.

“All this time,” she quietly said as her hands floated up to the steel bars before her. She leaned with heavy sorrow, resting her head against the cold metal. “How could you, Oliver? How could you keep her here, locked inside all these years?”

She let her hands slide off the door of the cage and turned back to Wendell in search of an explanation.

“An unfortunate turn of events, I’m afraid,” was all he said in his defense. “But I take good care of her. She has ample room to fly around and is fed daily with the finest rats and mice in the area. Luckily such rodents are ample around here.”

“But why? What did she ever do to you?” Billy asked the question, needing to get Wendell to reveal more of himself and his plan. Billy was still trying to search his way through all the chaos, and knew the answers lay inside his captor.

“It’s not what she did to me, Blind Billy, but what she could do for me.” Wendell patted the side of his beast, the solid thump of flesh against metal echoing in the studio wing. “My baby here needs all the shifter blood it can get. Unfortunately, dear mommy eagle over there did not have quite what I needed. But thankfully her progeny does.”

Charlotte stepped forward in shock. “Are you referring to Dathan?”

Wendell avoided the question. “Did you know? Bald eagles have the most death-defying mating ritual. It’s really quite astounding. They fly up, high into the air, lock their talons together, and then get into a cartwheel spin as they fall toward the ground, breaking apart at the last minute. Hopefully.”

Billy had seen the cartwheel courtship flight a couple of times from his home in the wild. It was a remarkable, terrifying thing to behold, even when it’s all a blur.

“What’s your point, Oliver?” Charlotte demanded to know.

Wendell snapped his fingers. “My point, Charlotte dear, is that bald eagles are rare birds. Your nephew is also a rare bird. A rare bird among horses and a rare horse among birds.”

“What the hell are you nattering on about, Wendell?” William tried to sound like he was the one in charge as he chomped down on his cigar.

“Master Dathan there is a winged horse,” Wendell announced. “The first in a thousand generations, and the only one I’m aware of within a thousand miles. He is the bona fide offspring of a horse shifter and a bird shifter. The magnificent hybrid.”

William’s cigar fell out of his mouth as his jaw dropped. Charlotte’s hand flew up to hers as she stifled a gasp. Dathan’s eyes closed in silent resignation at being outed.

“How did you find out?” Billy asked, though he had already pieced together the answer.

“Oh that was the easiest part,” Wendell replied. “I knew if I hired you to search and find my imaginary horse thief, you’d bring this one in eventually.” He nodded to Dathan. “Then, when I saw how you were looking at him at the police precinct during the identify parade, it was clear that you had fallen ass over tea kettle in love. I had my suspicions, as I said, that your mate was a flying horse, but I could never catch him in the act, despite spying for all those years. So I rigged up a little trap in the woods.”

“Without a ceiling,” Billy nodded, “knowing the only way out was up.”

“Something that wouldn’t be any trouble at all for your four-legged love bird,” Wendell concluded. “I watched the entire transformation and escape from a safe distance.”

Billy clapped his hands, as Oliver bowed down from atop his mount. “Brilliant, Mr. Wendell,” Billy said. “Honestly. I’ve really got to hand it to you. You planned this all out perfectly. Even built an exact replica of your birdcage here.”

“Only much larger, of course,” Wendell said as he walked his beast over to it. “This one, however, has a ceiling.”

“So there’s no way in or out at all,” Billy said.

“Oh there’s a door. One simply has to know how to find it,” Wendell said with pride.

Billy tried not to smile as Oliver was doing exactly what he had hoped. Pride and a desperate need to be acknowledged for it was strong in Wendell. Hubris in spades!

“See?” Wendell said as he leaned down and ran his hand over the steel bars. “A small release somewhere here, embedded in the steel...”

Billy heard a click sound.

“... ah, there it is. Once released, all you need to do is push it open.”

Wendell eased the door open in demonstration, then quickly shut it again.

“Push it open?” Billy said. “A genius inventor like yourself, I would have thought, might have made the door open automatically.”

“I could have, my smart fellow, but then it would have increased the chances of the birds escaping. It’s far too heavy for them to lift on their own this way, ensuring their security.”

“Of course, of course,” Billy concurred with a nod of his head. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Well that’s the difference between you and I,” Wendell replied. “One of many.”

Billy nodded once more.

Just keep it up, Wendell, he thought, and you’ll eventually tell me how to unravel this whole mess.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Dathan, still in a state of shock after discovering that his mother was alive, only seemed to realize at that moment that his uncle, the Police Commissioner, had finally arrived.

“This may be the first time you’ve heard me say it, Uncle,” Dathan exclaimed, “but am I ever glad to see you.”

William gave a half-hearted smile and a limp gesture as he puffed repeatedly on his cigar. It had gone out.

“Aren’t you going to arrest him then?” Dathan asked.

“Arrest who?” William was distracted as he relighted his stogie.

“Why Wendell, of course. Surely you’ve heard enough.”

“Oh I’ve heard enough, alright,” the Police Commissioner said. Once his cigar was smoldering again, he took a couple of gratifying puffs and looked up to Wendell. “Let’s get this over with, Oliver. I’d like to get back home and enjoy a stiff glass of bourbon before bed.”

“Of course, Commissioner.”

At that moment, the tail that was a snake wrapped itself quickly around Dathan before anyone knew what was happening.

“Dathan!” Billy cried as he leapt to his feet. The wolf end reached out and held Billy down with ease, while the serpent wrangled Dathan in.

“Stop!” Dathan cried. “What are you doing?”

He fought with everything he had to stop himself from being drawn in, but he was no match for the force of the machine.

“Uncle? What’s happening?”

“Sorry kid,” William said. “It’s for your own good.”

“Aunt Tottie?” He cried out to his aunt, but she turned her face away in shame. “He promised not to hurt you, Dathan.” She

turned her face to Wendell with a threatening look in her eye. “You did promise that, Oliver.”

“And it’s a promise I fully intend to keep,” Wendell said as he pressed a button to his left. “He’ll feel the tiniest prick, but it shouldn’t hurt a big strong man like him, not one little bit.”

A tiny window slid open on the Chimera and a long, steel lever folded out, with a syringe attached to the end of it. Before Dathan could register what was happening, the needle had stabbed him in the shoulder. He winced since it was on his injured side.

“See? That didn’t hurt at all, did it?”

“What are you doing to him?” Billy demanded, still pinned to the ground by the front paws of the beast.

“A special sedative. It will keep him fully conscious and aware, ensuring the blood flows properly, carrying all those delicious hormones and cells, but keeping his body more or less in a state of paralysis.”

“And after it’s done,” Charlotte said, “he’ll be totally fine. That’s what you promised, right?”

“Totally fine.” Wendell nodded as he spoke. He then reached for a box attached to the wall, and pressed a red button.

An automaton, dressed in whites like a family doctor, entered through a door on the opposite wall. He pushed an elaborate trolley loaded with two steel containers. Each container had an array of gauges, dials, and valves.

The bot approached Dathan and easily held his arm at length. The sedated shifter watched in horror as a second needle, tiny as a pin, was inserted into a bulging blue vein that wiggled on the top of his hand. It was attached to a long, thin tube, the other end of which was inserted by the automaton into a valve on one of the steel tanks. Dathan watched as it filled with the crimson red of his own blood.

“Yes, your nephew will be totally fine,” Wendell repeated as he supervised the entire procedure. “Only he won’t be able to

shift again.”

“Perfect,” Uncle William barked. “Really, Dathan, it’s all for the best.”

“Who’s best?” Dathan could barely get the words out. “Yours?”

He was fully awake and aware, able to speak and think and reason. He felt his adrenalin surging through his body, throwing him into a fight or flight state, but he could do neither. *How bizarre to feel so agitated and so incredibly relaxed all at the same time*, he thought. He could see the tube extending out of his arm and was fully aware of his life force ebbing out of him. A tear formed in his eye and rolled down his cheek. He hadn’t the strength to stop it.

“Enough!”

He heard Billy’s voice calling out, and watched his mate slowly, powerfully, rise to his feet, despite the force of the beast’s front paws pressing down on his mate’s chest.

“Take my blood instead.”

“Oh?” Wendell looked over with interest. “And what does your blood offer that this rare shifter’s blood doesn’t? Are you a flying horse, perchance? Are you keeping secrets, Blind Billy? What have you kept hidden away for thousands of years?”

“I’m not a flying horse,” Billy answered defiantly. “I am a Demi-God. Take my blood and take the blood of eternal life. That ought to trump a shifter, even one as rare as my fated mate.”

Dathan watched as Wendell nodded to the automaton. The robot pulled a lever on the side of the trolley, and a small exhaust of steam floated above it. He immediately felt his blood cease its flow into the tank.

“Well, well, well,” Wendell said, climbing down from his mount for the first time all evening. He walked right up to Billy, close enough for the Searcher to take an easy swing and

knock Wendell into next Tuesday. “This is interesting. Very interesting indeed. Tell me more.”

Dathan saw Billy look back at him with the most loving eyes he’d ever seen in his life.

“Hit the bastard, Billy,” Dathan called out, but Billy simply looked Wendell calmly in the eye.

“My father is a God,” Billy said. “I have the blood of the immortals running through me. Take it, and live forever, with powers you never before imagined.”

A smile, wide and evil and greedy, slowly spread across Wendell’s face like it was being painted on.

“Honestly, Billy, you had me at Demi-God,” Wendell said, then began to pace up and down the floor, his hands clasped behind his back. “Since you’re not a shifter, there’s no second form, no other half of you, whose blood you can sacrifice. If I hook you up to the machine, it will bleed you dry and leave you dead as a daisy.”

Dathan couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Billy, don’t do it. Being able to shift means nothing to me if I don’t have you.” He tried with every ounce of will he could muster to stand up and shake some sense into his mate, but it was no use. He couldn’t move a muscle.

“Just do it, Wendell,” Billy commanded, “but let Dathan go. He must be disconnected before another drop of his blood is taken from him.”

Wendell held Billy’s gaze for a moment, then clapped his hands loudly. “Done.”

He walked Billy to beside the Chimera, and Dathan couldn’t believe his mate went willingly. Wendell pressed the button once more, and once again the levered arm emerged from inside the machine and unfolded itself towards Billy. It stabbed him in the shoulder with the syringe. The automaton doctor then approached the Searcher, and caught him just as Billy fell to the floor. He inserted a new thin needle into the top of Billy’s hand.

“No!!!!” Dathan yelled, but it was too late. His mate’s blood was being pumped out of him and into the second tank on the trolley.

“I gotta say, Searcher,” William said, puffing on his cigar as he stood over Billy, “you surprise me. Pretty damn selfless of you to give your life for my nephew. Maybe you’re not such a reprobate after all.”

Charlotte leaned down and kissed Billy on the lips in a tender gesture of gratitude. “Thank you,” she whispered.

“Take care of him,” Billy whispered back to her. “All of him.”

“I will,” Charlotte said. “I promise.”

Dathan was a mess as tears rolled down his cheeks. “What? No! I can take care of myself, thank you very much. Billy. Don’t go. Please don’t go! Auntie, make this stop! Uncle William? Somebody! I won’t survive without him.”

“Of course you will, boy,” William replied. “We all get our hearts broken and we all bounce back. Eventually. You will too. There’s plenty of fish in the sea.”

They didn’t understand. A mate, once claimed, cannot survive without his other. Dathan looked over to his one true love. Billy’s eyes were radiant and filled with tenderness.

He must know I won’t survive without him, Dathan thought.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked.

“To save you,” Billy quietly replied. “This is all for you, my love.”

Dathan didn’t understand what Billy had up his sleeve, but desperately hoped it was a well-thought-out plan. His eyes followed Wendell, who removed Dathan’s tube from the steel tank, stopped it with a clamp, then walked the end of it over to the Chimera.

The back of the mechanical beast, where Wendell had been sitting most of the evening opened up like the gate on a coal firebox. Dathan watched as Wendell inserted the tube directly

into the Chimera and felt the blood once again pumping out of him.

“What... what are you doing?”

“Just a few ounces, my good man, and all will be well.”

“Wendell!” Billy yelled. “We had a deal!”

Even Uncle William was surprised by the sudden shift in events.

“What’s the big idea, Oliver? You promised Dathan wouldn’t lose more blood.”

“I did, but my girl here needs an injection. It won’t take much. Your nephew will be fine, and this way I still keep my agreement with you. He won’t be able to shift. You’ll have that albatross off your neck and walk right into the mayor’s office without a care in the world.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Trust me, Commissioner. This is all for the best.”

As the two of them were talking, Dathan caught his Aunt Tottie walking back from the bird cage. She looked at him as she held her finger up to her lips. *Shhh!*

“Damn you, Wendell,” Billy called as he lay motionless on the floor, the blood quickly draining from his body. “Soon you’ll have all of my blood. You don’t need any more of his.”

“Oh, but I do,” Wendell said as Dathan’s life force flowed into the machine. “You see, there’s one thing my girl is meant to do but can’t yet, and no other fuel source can make it happen except the blood of a flying creature that was never meant to be airborne.”

All eyes watched as two panels on the serpent end of the beast slid open on either side. Mechanical wings began to emerge, steel feather after steel feather after steel feather. Dathan beheld in amazed shock as the wings unfolded into a larger and larger span, stretching out for what seemed like forever across the vast space of the studio.

“Yes, my baby! Yes, yes, yes!” Wendell was positively giddy with excitement, and spouted scripture like a preacher gone wild. “And they will soar on wings like eagles; they will fly and not grow weary.”

The chimera’s wings, once fully out, flapped up and down with awesome force. What was at first only a serpent was now a fully formed half-dragon, attached to the hind end of a wolf.

“Perfection,” Wendell cried as he removed the tube from its internal tank. He stopped it up once again and handed the end to Dathan, laying it at his feet. “As promised. Not another drop.”

He then climbed into the opening where he had attached the tube. Dathan could only imagine that it was some kind of cockpit inside the beast. Once inside, Wendell gave an order to the automaton.

“Please escort the Commissioner and his wife out of the studio, and be sure to lock the door behind them. I don’t trust either of them to not rush back in here and play hero with the boys.”

He then turned to Dathan. “Your sedative will wear off shortly. You’ll stay immobile just long enough to watch your mate pass on to... well, wherever it is that immortals go when they finally die. By then, I’ll be long gone on the hunt for the rarest of shifters the world has hidden away.”

Dathan watched the two doors close over top of Wendell as the Chimera came fully to life. The sight was as awesome as it was terrifying, and the screech that emerged from the mechanical creature’s dual mouths was ear-piercing in its deafening horror. The heavy metal machine took to the air with remarkable ease, and ascended to the high ceiling above, crashing through the skylight glass and vanishing into the night.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Billy was starting to feel very light-headed. He closed his eyes and tried to focus. He didn't have a plan, other than getting the Chimera out of here and away from him. He knew he wouldn't be able to out-fight it, but with a bit of distance and a moment of time, he was confident he could outsmart its creator.

Now he wasn't so sure. He'd need energy to strategize, and it was all being slowly pumped out of him. He was confident that his blood supply, as a demi-god, would outlast every other man or beast, but he didn't know for how long. So long as the pump was running and he remained immobile, it was just a matter of time.

He heard the door lock and hoped the automaton would return. Maybe there was a chance to reason with it and get it to disconnect him, or revitalize Dathan somehow.

Who am I kidding? Reason with a bot? No chance.

Besides, the doctor-bot didn't come back. Likely standing guard on the other side of the locked door, keeping Charlotte and William out.

"Babe?"

Billy opened his eyes to focus on Dathan.

"Hey, handsome," Billy said. "You look totally hot."

Dathan smiled and Billy noticed something he'd never seen before on his mate's face.

"You have dimples," Billy said. "They're adorable."

"Thanks," Dathan replied quietly. "They've always been there."

"I never noticed them before." Billy then looked to the ceiling. He saw the broken glass of the skylight and could detect the thin branches of the trees that hovered above. He looked to his left, and could see the crisp and clear lines on the machinery and workshop, fine metal shavings on the floor, and the streaks of moisture on the windowpane. He could also make out the

tiny numbers inside the gauges attached to the metal blood tanks on the trolley. What before was a grey, blurry stain on the floor where Wendell's beast had stood came into sharp focus. It was his gun.

"My eyes," Billy said, his voice choking with emotion.

"I can see them," Dathan responded. "They've never been more beautiful."

Billy wanted to laugh, but the engagement of the seventeen facial muscles required for such an act was beyond him. "I can see perfectly. My vision has been... restored. Your dimples, eyelashes, and the detail on those sexy suspenders. I can see it all."

Dathan smiled. "That's amazing, babe! I think your act of selflessness just redeemed you. You've atoned for your sin of pride or whatever it was that made them blind you in the first place. Congratulations, my darling. Well earned!"

Billy then heard a cry enter Dathan's voice. "I just wish you had more time to enjoy it."

Billy choked up a bit as well. "Me too, babe. Me too."

He heard a sound from towards the bird cage, and tried to look over there, but his face was turned away from it.

"Can you see the bird cage?" he asked Dathan. "What's going on there?"

He watched Dathan's eyes look up and beyond him, and could see them light up with what looked to Billy like hope.

"Mother!" Dathan said. "She's got her talons wrapped around the steel bars and is trying to lift the door open."

Billy felt a surge of possibility in his heart. "The door? It's unlocked?"

"It is," Dathan said. "Aunt Tottie must have unlocked it before she left. I saw her coming away from the cage when Wendell was filling that beast's tank with my blood."

Billy saw a smile form on his mate's face. The tiniest crack of joy. He was recovering from the sedative. Dathan's voice sounded a bit stronger too. Billy took it as a good sign, hoping he'll have his strength back soon.

"She's lifting the door back. She's doing it, Billy."

Billy could see the faintest reflection of the cage from the window opposite him. The bald eagle was flapping her mighty wings and straining with great effort, but slowly moving the heavy barred door open.

"Just a little bit more," Billy tried to encourage her from his immobile spot, "just a little bit more... you can do it..."

Three more birds flew over to where the eagle was struggling against the weight of the door. A pair of cockatoos and a falcon. The three of them worked together to lift the door and hold it open as the eagle drew in her wings, stepped through, and launched herself on the other side.

Billy watched the window's reflection as the bird circled once in the high ceiling of the room, fixed her eyes on her target, then swooped down to the trolley. She lifted the brass lever with her beak, and deactivated the pump. Billy felt the flow stop shortly thereafter. He was safe for the moment, but not entirely out of the woods.

The eagle flew across the room, towards a depleted wood bin kept for a winter stove, and collected some small twigs in her talons. She brought them back to where Dathan was lying and dropped them off. Then went back for more.

"She's building a nest," Dathan said. "It's her way of caring for me."

Billy tried to smile. His disappointment at not being able to do so was tempered by watching his mate smile wider and wider.

"Incredible," Dathan commented as the eagle continued her collection of materials. Thread, discarded papers, bits of wood, human hair.

“Dathan, babe,” Billy said. “Did you just move your head?” He watched as his lover nodded ever so slightly.

“I did,” Dathan called. “I’m coming back.”

“How does it feel,” Billy asked.

“Good. My face felt totally numb but it’s starting to go back to normal.”

“That’s a good sign.”

Billy turned his thoughts towards next steps. Clearly they couldn’t go to the police for any help, not when the Commissioner himself was complicit. They’d have to go after Wendell on their own. It will be all the harder because he’d be up in the air and they’d be earthbound, but they’ll have to try.

If only Dathan could shift and fly us to him.

Billy tried not to let his thoughts lean towards the impossible, but he couldn’t help it. He kept his focus on his mate.

“Hey! You just wiggled your fingers!”

Billy was loving being able to see crisply and clearly again, and there was nothing else he’d rather be feasting his full vision on than his mate slowly coming back to life.

Dathan sat up. He was actually sitting up and his mother, trapped in her bird form, was perched on his shoulder, the leather of the suspender harness protecting his skin from her sharp talons. Billy could see that she was keeping an eye on the world around her son. He was touched by the sight, and felt the corner of his own mouth turn up into a smile. *That’s about four muscles working.* He was on his way back too.

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Once Dathan’s could finally move again, he crawled over and gently removed the IV needle from Billy’s hand. He then did his own.

Billy was able to move his head a bit now, enough for the two of them to join together in a kiss.

“I didn’t think I was ever going to taste your lips again,” Billy said. “I have to admit I was freaking out.”

“You hide it well,” Dathan said. “You’re as cool as they come, Blind Billy Hipp.”

“Not blind anymore,” Billy said, “not even partially. But nobody needs to know that just yet. I think it might work to our advantage.

It took a while, but when Billy was able to stand, Dathan helped him walk around a bit to get the feeling back in his legs. He had lost way more blood than his mate, so his recovery was taking a bit longer. Exhausted with only a few steps, he collapsed into the chair.

“I can’t make it very far, I’m afraid,” Billy said.

“Rest, babe. Get your strength back. I’ll take care of you.”

Billy smiled. “I can take care of myself,” he gently mocked. “In the meantime, Wendell gets further and further away.”

Dathan nodded his head and shrugged. “True, but he won’t get far. That machine of his will stick pretty close to home.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

Dathan was rubbing Billy’s legs, trying to get the blood flowing again.

“Its strength is in its legs, not wings. Which is why he took off so impressively. It was seventy-five percent leaping and back strength, and about twenty-five percent wing strength. Those wings will soon wear down, tire out, fail... whatever it is that machines do. I’ll bet my balls on it.”

Billy couldn’t argue with the logic. After all, between the two of them, his mate knew far more about aerodynamics and the science of flight than he did.

“Speaking of balls,” Dathan whispered as his hand reached up to Billy’s crotch. “Any feeling down here yet?”

Billy sighed and lit up at his lover’s touch. Dathan rubbed his hand over Billy’s denim, and the Searcher could feel himself

rising to the occasion.

“An awful lot of blood will go there if you keep doing that,” Billy groaned, “and in case you haven’t noticed, I don’t have much to spare.”

Dathan kept massaging, and Billy felt himself go a bit red in the face.

“You know your mother’s watching,” he said.

Dathan looked over his shoulder at the eagle, and turned back to Billy with a kiss.

“She knows what I’m doing,” Dathan said. “Just helping your plasma bounce back faster. If your body thinks it will need the energy for something as rigorous as a good fuck with your mate, it will work overtime to produce more red blood cells.”

“But we don’t have time for a fuck, good or otherwise,” Billy said.

“Mmmm, but your body doesn’t know that. Shhhh. I won’t tell if you won’t.”

Billy tried to enjoy the therapy session, but all he could think of was Wendell getting away.

“You seem to have bounced back, no problem,” Billy said. “And without the added benefit of me rubbing your dick. What’s your secret?”

Dathan shrugged. “I couldn’t say. I just feel... fully alive. Even my shoulder feels better. It’s not sore at all.”

Billy sat up, and put his hand on Dathan’s, stopping him from the pleasure massage.

“Do you think you could shift?”

He saw fear flash across Dathan’s eyes. “I don’t know,” his mate said. “I’m afraid to try.”

“We’re fated mates, right?” Billy said.

“Forever and ever,” Dathan replied.

“So what if, when my sight was fully restored, some part of you was fully restored as well? Just by virtue of being my one true mate? After all, spouses become one after they commit to each other. Mates too.”

Dathan stood up. “There’s only one way to find out.” He unclasped his suspenders and threw them to the floor. Billy watched as Dathan then peeled off his shirt, and was astounded at his physique. Either he really couldn’t see for shit before, or Dathan was bigger, better, and stronger in every way.

“Uh, I know you just got your sight fully restored,” Dathan looked at him sideways, “but I’m still kinda shy when it comes to shifting. Do you mind...?”

“Oh, yeah. No problem,” Billy said as he reached for the suspenders. “I’m hanging on to these, though.” He then averted his eyes.

A moment later, the sound of a horse’s whinny graced his ears. His mate stood before him, easily four hands taller than he was before. His forelegs were bulging with muscle, and he looked as if he could run through a brick wall.

“I knew you could do it, babe. I just knew it. Pretty fucking impressive, Dathan. And your wings?”

The horse’s lips pulled back into what looked like a cocky smile as both wings shot out from either side. Their span was even greater than before, and for the first time Billy could appreciate the intricacies of the feathers. Hundreds and hundreds of them, perfectly layered and responsive to the slightest mental command.

The bald eagle flew and landed on his mate’s head, like a figurehead on the front of a mighty ship.

It took a huge effort, but Billy wheeled the trolley holding the blood tanks over to Dathan’s side. He stopped to pick up his gun, and holstered it as he used the trolley as steps to climb onto his mate’s back. As soon as he was secure, Billy kicked

the trolley away, and watched as it fell over, the blood leaking out of both tanks and staining the floor in a mix of reds.

Dathan kicked the trolley to, as if adding his support, although he did turn his head in Billy's direction, the question evident.

“What? We don't need it anymore, and this way nobody else can use it either.”

The horse tilted his head slightly, held for a moment, then thrust it up and down in a nod.

“Good. Glad we're agreed. Now... Let's ride.”

Dathan's wings flapped rapidly, like Billy weighed nothing more than a hummingbird, and lifted himself, Billy, and mother eagle off the floor with the greatest of ease.

As they flew off through the shattered skylight above, Billy looked back down to see the automaton running back into the room, slipping in the spilled blood on the floor. It was petty, enjoying a machine's fall, and Billy didn't want to dwell on anything petty. Not when he was on his mate's back, and they were flying. He turned his eyes to the night sky, and enjoyed the sharp outline of the stars for the first time in a few thousand years.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Dathan couldn't believe how freaking great he felt. The healing of his shoulder was just the tip of the iceberg. His wings flapped with little effort, and it felt like he could fly for days on end without needing a rest. His legs, galloping along while he flew as if he was running on the ground, felt stronger and more agile than ever before. He didn't feel weighed down with Billy on his back, but lighter somehow, as if all the laws of physics and flight had suddenly turned upside down.

The irony, after experiencing Wendell's outrageous invention back at the studio, was that he now felt as tireless as a machine was supposed to be. It was as if he was generating more energy than he spent. Dathan no longer saw himself as a horse shifter who could fly. He was a man, bird, horse, and mate all in one, and knew not where one identity began and the other ended. Nor did he care.

"You're as beautiful as the day you were born, my child."

His eagle mother was speaking to him, and he understood what she was saying without the need for words.

"I've missed you my entire life," he said. Again, he didn't know how it was happening, since he lacked the ability to speak while in his horse form, but he knew she understood him. Talking without words.

I'll have to learn how to do this with Billy, he thought. He'd love this.

"We have much to catch up on," she said, "and I look forward to spending many, many days learning all about you. But for now, we must find that madman before he harms another soul."

"Billy is the best Searcher in the business. If anyone can find Wendell, it will be him."

"Your mate is very special. I like him. And he loves you to bits. Nothing makes a mother happier than knowing her baby is taken care of. But I think I can help him. We can work

together to find him. I'll fly ahead and use my eagle eyes. He could be anywhere."

Dathan felt her lift off, and caught her eye as she flew beside him. A quick nod and she veered off to the right, disappearing into the night.

"Your mother saved us both," Billy said as he patted Dathan's side. "I see where you get your nurturing qualities from."

Dathan felt a warmth run through him. His father gave him strength. His mother, wings. And his mate, renewed life. He couldn't have been happier if he tried. The brilliant starry night, the warm summer air, the smells of the wild... it all flooded inside his senses until he felt he would burst with joy and purpose.

"Steady boy," Billy said.

Dathan could feel his mate's legs squeezing him tightly on his flanks.

"Keep an eye on your mother. I think we're getting close."

Dathan shuddered as it hit him that he'd almost lost his mate. Was it really only a few days before that he was standing in that police lineup, wondering who was on the other side of the glass? Did he, in his wildest dreams, think it would end up like this?

C'est la sweetest vie!

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He felt Billy tap his flank.

"There. To the east. See it?"

Dathan looked toward the east. The sky there was more blue than black. Dawn was on its way. When was the last time they slept? Dathan thought. Or ate? Back at the prison and that seemed like hours before. But no matter. He had energy for days.

"It's Wendell."

Dathan looked again, and this time noticed a small dot, like a shadow, contrasting with the dark blue behind it.

“Let’s go meet him, shall we?” Billy said, as Dathan felt his mane being tugged to that side. He tilted his wings and leaned into the turn.

The dot was getting bigger. No longer a shadow, it caught a bit of whatever light was left behind by the moon. It flew straight for them as they flew straight for it.

Dathan could make out the distinctive shape of the object in the sky: a flying hybrid beast that was half wolf, half dragon.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Billy had to think quickly. He had to make sure he was close enough to the beast to disarm it somehow, but still remain safe from crashing to the ground with it. He knew Wendell was inside it, joining himself with it somehow. The machine seemed to act upon instinct, which Billy assumed was Wendell's own instincts somehow fused with it.

"I've got an idea," Billy yelled into Dathan's ear as he leaned forward. "That machine thinks and acts like Wendell. And we both know that Wendell is hot for each of us. Let's use that to our advantage."

Dathan whinnied loudly as he flew. Billy was beginning to understand what his mate was saying to him in this form, and took his whinny as agreement.

"Once we get close, fly up as high as you can. He'll follow. Then see if you can lock eyes and give 'em your best fuck me smile. I'm betting Wendell will start thinking with his pecker again, and agree to some foreplay."

Billy had Dathan's suspenders tucked inside his jacket. He let them out as long as he could, just enough to wrap around Dathan's breast, as he continued to explain his plan.

"Once you have the Chimera's attention, lock your legs around hers and commence the Cartwheel Courtship Flight. Let the eagle side of you engage with the same in her. I'll be tied on tight back here, and while we tumble down, I'll get my best shot at that creature's one and only vulnerable spot."

Dathan whinnied again, this time a bit darker in tone, and shook his head side to side.

"I know, I know," Billy called, "I don't like our chances much either, but unless you have another idea in the next ten seconds you can clearly communicate to me, it's our best option. Once the machine is immobilized, I'll snatch Wendell out of there. Just make sure you disengage before we all crash to the ground."

Dathan tipped his head down as Billy cinched up the suspenders around his own belt. He was fully secured to his mate. Which meant, of course, if Dathan couldn't disengage in time, Billy would crash down right along with him. He was prepared for that.

"I love you more than anything, Dathan," Billy called as he kissed his mate on the top of the neck. "See you on the other side."

The chimera was fast approaching as Wendell's voice sounded out through a blowhard speaker.

"Looks like I didn't bleed that shifter long enough," he announced. "A problem I'll remedy soon enough."

"You'll have to catch us first," Billy yelled, and yanked back on Dathan's mane, sending his mate flying straight up. The Chimera followed.

"Do you know how I destroyed your mother in the end?" Billy was taunting Wendell now, provoking him, keeping him engaged. Anger led to lust with the weak-minded, and if he could make Wendell believe that his creature could take Dathan by force, then all the better.

"I've heard the story," Wendell's voice floated on the wind. "But it won't help you this time around."

Billy ignored him and continued, keeping his attention. "I flew up above her and fired arrow after arrow into her back. It slowed her down but wouldn't kill her."

"Just as your bullets won't have any effect on my baby," Wendell shouted.

"She could breathe fire, your mum, and I got the idea to attach a brick of lead to the end of my spear. I shoved it into her dragon's mouth and let it sit there. It was melted by her fiery breath, and the liquid lead slid down her throat, then turned to solid again inside her stomach. Messed her up pretty good."

The serpent's mouth on the Chimera opened and shot flames out of it.

“Yes, a horrible, cruel death,” Wendell cried. “One which you will dearly pay for, Blind Billy. Throw as much lead as you like into my baby’s jaws, it won’t make a difference. Some of us learn from the mistakes of our parents. Unlike your mate there, who will soon be back in my studio, providing me with a never ending source of life.”

“If you think his blood is tasty, you should try his other fluids. Out of this world!”

Billy watched for a change in the beast. Sure enough, he saw the slightest jolt of desire shudder through it. A twitch of the wolf’s ear, a swelling of the dragon’s breast. The signs were subtle but unmistakable.

“Now, Dathan,” Billy whispered. “Show him what you got!”

He felt his mate lean even further back as he continued to climb up in the sky. He wasn’t exactly sure what Dathan did to send the flirtatious signal, but judging from the Chimera’s reaction, it worked brilliantly.

The beast began to roar and pant. Billy, secured by the suspenders, drew his pistol and hung on to it with both hands. He felt his mate’s forelegs make contact with the Chimera’s, and they locked together in an embrace.

“Go!” Billy called.

The four of them, joined together way up in the sky, began to turn forward in a somersault motion. On the first turn, Billy fired at the back of the Chimera, aiming for the latch that held the cockpit doors together. He nailed it, and the doors flew open.

It was empty.

“What the hell?”

“A lucky shot for a blind man,” Wendell’s voice called.

“Partially blind,” Billy called back, keeping up appearances as he scouted around in search of where the driver of this creature had gone. “Great trick, Wendell. Where the hell are you?”

“Close enough to see what’s going on,” the voice said, “but far enough to stay hidden away. I sure hope you don’t get motion sick easily. That’s a lot of spinning.”

Billy glanced down to the ground, which was fast approaching. They had completed three full turns so far, and had about three left before they crashed.

He looked back to the open cockpit. The valve for the blood supply was clearly there, but locking on with his aim was going to be tricky as they tumbled down.

He took a shot. It ricocheted off with a spark. Then another. It too missed the mark.

Only two revolutions left before they had to disengage.

“Shoot at her all you want, your bullets will never penetrate the steel shell that I built.”

“She has one vulnerable spot, just like your mom. I plan to fill it full of lead.”

Wendell laughed manically. “The blood line valve is an impossible target to hit for someone standing still on the ground and in possession of perfect vision. You’ve too many strikes against you, Blind Billy. Soon your limitations will bring you crashing down, and my mother’s murder will be avenged.”

“So that’s what this was all about for you? Not Dathan’s blood but my death.”

“Ha, ha!” Wendell laughed as though he’d already won. “I’m happy to accept both!”

The last spin. Billy had one shot left. He cocked the hammer on his pistol and took aim.

“Sorry, asshole, but you’ll have to settle for neither.”

Billy fired. The lead bullet found its mark and entered into the whatever it was that made up the beating heart of this beast.

“And you still owe me five hundred bucks,” he added as he slapped Dathan twice on the neck. “Let go, babe.”

The front legs of the Chimera went limp as Dathan's pulled away. Billy could see in the early pink of dawn droplets of blood were leaking out of the Chimera's four eyes and cockpit. Its wings were locked in an upward position as it hurtled to the earth below.

Dathan managed to fly them both around to a safe distance just in time to see the machine crash on the ground. A deafening sound of crushing metal and shattering glass thundered through the air.

Dathan landed some yards away, and walked towards the pile of scrap metal as Billy unfastened himself from the suspenders. He got off his mount and cautiously walked forward to investigate the damage.

He needn't have worried. Whatever gave the machine life was gone, and the million pieces that went into its construction lay scattered across the meadow. The speaker that transmitted the sound of Wendell's voice was nothing but a bent box of wires and useless in its silence.

Billy kicked at a few broken parts, wondering where to begin in a search for Wendell. Because he would be found. The man couldn't be far, but they were surrounded by forest. Even with the early dawn's light, it would be a lengthy search.

While Billy was kicking through the rubble, Dathan shifted back to his human self. He approached his mate wearing only the blanket and a pair of pants. Billy threw his arms around him.

"You did it, babe."

"We did it." Dathan sounded tired.

"I didn't think we had a hope, to be honest, but we managed to achieve the impossible."

Dathan wrapped his arms around his mate and surveyed the damage. "It was a brilliant strategy, Billy. I love how your mind works, but next time, maybe a bit more warning about the Cartwheel of Death idea. I feel like I could start barfing at any moment and never stop."

Billy tightened his hold. "I'll be right there with you, holding your hair out of the way while you do it."

"You say the sweetest things."

Billy tilted his head in curious teasing. "That was quite the seduction, Dathan. You convinced a machine hell-bent on killing me to stop momentarily and consider having sex with you. Should I be worried?"

Dathan laughed. "Nah, I just showed her something she couldn't possibly ignore."

Billy raised one eyebrow.

Dathan guided Billy's hand down to his groin and he melted a little at the touch.

"Mmm. Works for me," Billy said, his voice deepening. "Is it possible you've gotten bigger down there too?"

"You think this is impressive," Dathan said, "you should see it in my horse state."

"It's impressive enough to woo a Chimera," Billy agreed.

Kissing was inevitable. Billy had been too close to death to not want to celebrate the fact they were both still alive. He could feel himself growing hard when he spotted a bald eagle flying in the early morning sunrise.

"And there's your mother," he said, breaking off and trying not to look too embarrassed.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Pulled from his lustful thoughts, Dathan observed the eagle's non-verbal communication - hovering in the air, circling around, tugging with her talons - and told Billy what she was saying.

"She knows where Wendell is, and it's not far. We should go after him otherwise he could just set up shop somewhere else."

Billy groaned, but it was clear he agreed. They followed along on the ground as the eagle soared overhead. Entering a glade of trees, they hiked through the forest, along the edge of a stream until they came to a set of beaver ponds. An entrance to a wolf's den could just be seen under a large aspen tree that stretched up to the sky.

"He's hiding in there," Dathan whispered. "Wolf dens often have multiple tunnels leading inside. He could slip out as we made our way in."

Billy scouted the area quickly. "You go in there, making as much noise as you can, and he'll likely run out one of the other exits. I'll watch and get the jump on him as soon as he appears."

Dathan's mother sat perched above the entrance. He knew if something were to happen inside, he'd only have to call and she'd be there in heartbeat, ripping Wendell's eyes out of his head with her razor-sharp talons.

"If you see him come out and Billy misses him," Dathan instructed, "Do your worst."

The bald eagle nodded once as Dathan bent to enter the narrow cave. He made his way inside on his belly, face down, crawling along the tunnel.

"He's in here, Billy," Dathan yelled, as convincingly as he could, just loud enough to be heard. "I could smell Wendell's stench anywhere. Follow me. And bring your gun."

He listened for sounds up ahead in the tunnel. Sure enough, the sudden noise of footsteps running and the slight grunt of a

man crouching down to crawl quickly out of a hole. Dathan gave it a few seconds before emerging into the den proper.

It was long ago abandoned by wolves, but large enough inside for Dathan to stand up. Some articles of clothing along with empty bottles and dog-eared books told him it was home to some shifters once upon a time. Wild enough for the wolves to keep their young safe, but domesticated enough for men and women to stand and move comfortably inside.

Wendell had left a lamp burning, so Dathan was able to see the advanced communication system the inventor was using to speak through the Chimera remotely. It was a blowhorn with cables attached that ran up through the inside of the aspen's trunk. There was also a periscope eyepiece, which Dathan peeked into. He could see the vast expanse of the early morning sky outside through it.

Oliver Wendell had clearly mapped out his version of an exit strategy some time before and had built the surveillance location so he couldn't be snuck up on. A two-way radio box with a crank on the side was attached to the console. A transmission mouthpiece and receiver for the ear sat in separate cradles connected to the box. Wendell had not only rigged up a view finder and sound system to the heavens, but a communication system back to the city and beyond.

"Clever, clever bastard," Dathan whispered in astonishment.

He picked up the radio headset and turned the crank. An operator's voice came through, sounding as if it were a thousand miles away.

"Please connect me to the Central Police Precinct at once. This is an emergency," Dathan said, using an authoritative a voice as possible.

"Yes sir. One moment please."

A click, then a pause, then another click sounded in the earpiece.

"Go ahead."

A new voice on the other end of the line. “Deputy Chief Turner here.”

“I’m calling to report a suspect in the Wolf Shifter abductions.”

There was a pause. “Uhm. OK. I’m listening,” Turner replied.

“We have him in custody just outside the city. Stand by for coordinates. And tell Station Chief Tate not to trust the Police Commissioner. He’s involved with the crime.”

Dathan could hear Turner’s shocked reaction through his sharp intake of breath. “Who is this? Turner asked.

“The Commissioner’s nephew. Now are you ready for my location coordinates or are you going to hum and haw at your good fortune again?”

After Dathan had given precise directions, he heard Billy calling him from outside.

“Got him! Dathan? All good down there?”

Dathan answered as he crawled back up the tunnel. “Never better. On my way out.”

When he emerged, Billy had Wendell tightly bound in Dathan’s suspenders, and was holding him at gunpoint.

“Well,” Dathan said, “those leather supports of mine have certainly come in handy. Versatile fashion at its finest.” He looked up to the bald eagle, perched in a tree nearby. “Good work, mother. We would never have found him without your eagle eyes.”

Wendell snorted derisively. “I should say not. If Blind Billy Hipp were leading the way, you’d still be wandering aimlessly in the forest.”

Billy just smiled and winked at Dathan.

“What should we do with him?” Billy asked.

Dathan indicated the trunk of the aspen tree. “Tie him up here. He has a two-way radio stashed down in the den, along with

some other surprises. I put a call into the police precinct. Station Chief Tate never liked my uncle, so I gave him a helpful tip. They'll be here in thirty minutes."

Billy pushed Wendell to the tree trunk above the entrance to the den. He wrapped the leather suspenders around the trunk and threaded them through the brass ring. One tight pull and Wendell was bound. Billy yanked a red silk kerchief out of Wendell's jacket pocket and stuffed it into Wendell's mouth.

"Just so you don't disturb the delicate silence of nature," Billy said.

Dathan looked at his eagle mother. "If he tries to escape, rip out his liver and eat it."

The eagle appeared to smile as Wendell's eyes looked as if they would pop out of his head in terror.

Billy nodded towards the den entrance. "What kind of surprises did you say were down there?"

Dathan smiled as he felt a twitch in his groin. "Come on, I'll show you. We've got thirty minutes to kill."

He took his mate by the hand and led him down the long, thin tunnel. They emerged in the lantern-lit warmth of the den below, and immediately locked lips. Food, getting clean, hell even sleep could wait.

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Dathan's want overwhelmed him. His body rippled with delight at his mate's closeness. They'd not had nearly enough time to savor the new sweet tastes and delights of being mates. Too bogged down by mystery, and the intricacies of family.

Dathan let out a soft sigh as Billy claimed his neck, sucking and nibbling as if he was the most decadent of treats. "Oh, my sweet Billy. I'm so glad this is over."

"Our lives, my love, are simply beginning."

Billy's firm hands made quick work of Dathan's blanket poncho and pants and the gaze of longing, love and desire that

filled his newly refreshed eyes made Dathan want to weep with the joy of it all. Nimble fingers ensured Billy joined him quickly in nakedness, and before Dathan could enjoy the sight for too long,, Billy's muscled arms had delivered him gently to the soft dusty ground.

Looking up into the eyes of his lover, his mate, Dathan arched his back into the warm skin and sighed, blissfully happy just to be alone with Billy, in his arms, safe and warm and loved.

Dathan's instincts had kept them safe today and now, they would bring his mate to ecstasy. A small part of him wished they were at home, in a nice soft bed, but anywhere with Billy would do.

Making quick work of bringing a flush of sweat and desire to Billy's face with kisses and gentle nips, Dathan reached for Billy's cock and was pleased to find it already firm and leaking for him. "It's your turn to make me fly," Dathan whimpered.

"Challenge accepted, my love."

Billy's lips crushed his as hands roved and caressed Dathan's firm curves and hard edges. Dathan watched under long lashes as Billy deftly sucked his fingers before wrapping his expert hands between his buttocks and quickly sinking inside him.

Dathan arched into the pressure and let out a slow deliberate breath as the burn turned to pleasure. Billy made quick work of the prep, but muttered under his breath about the definite lack of lube. Dathan cast his eyes around, spying a bottle which looked relatively new of oil. He reached for it, uncorking it, and scented it quickly. "Here, use this."

Billy quirked a brow. "We could wait-"

"No waiting, we've waited too long already. We can't eat yet and the gods only knows when we'll finally get some sleep, but we can have this. I need you and want you, here and now."

Billy smiled and without any further questioning doused his hands and cock in the mildly scented oil. He gripped Dathan's hips as if they were a rescue raft in a raging sea and plunged

inside him without another word. The sting, the burn, followed by absolute pleasure had Dathan flying again in a totally different way. Having Billy inside him filled him in a way he'd never felt before.

Whole, and complete. Loved and accepted. It was a heady feeling.

“Yes,” he hissed through the burn, pulling Billy closer to shower him with kisses.

As Billy quickened his pace, Dathan's eyes roved over his mate greedily. The way the sweat danced on his skin in the lamp-lit light made Dathan's heart swell. *My mate, my mother, answers. What a day...*

Billy's hand came to rest around Dathan's engorged cock wrapping him firmly in warm slick fingers. Tugging and stroking Dathan's firm length along to the rhythm of his thrusts, Dathan knew he was a goner. His balls tightened and ached and as Billy arched back and emptied his seed deep inside him, Dathan lost his load across his own chest.

Sweaty and panting heavily, the men slumped into the dirt and lay in each other's arms, if just for a second. Dathan felt all was right in his world, maybe for the first time ever. Billy sighed deeply, and Dathan too heard the sounds of footsteps approaching above ground. Grabbing for the least soiled cloth he could find, Billy wiped up the evidence of Dathan's desire, before wrapping him tighter in his arms for just a moment longer.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

It was the voice of Franklin Tate barking above that reminded Billy there was still a world outside that required his attention.

“I don’t want to go out there,” Billy said.

“Me neither,” Dathan replied with one last nuzzle in Billy’s chest. “But the sooner we get this Wendell business over with, the better.”

Billy looked around once more. “I like it here,” he said. “Let’s come back some time.”

“It can be our little love den,” Dathan offered. Jumping to his feet he held out a hand Billy was happy to take. Dressing quickly, as best they could, Billy led the way out of the den.

“Well look what just crawled out of the earth.”

Billy was greeted with Tate’s arrogant charm as he dusted the dirt off his chest. Dathan stood close behind.

“Good morning, Frank,” Dathan said.

Deputy station chief Turner was busy untying Wendell from the tree. The second the kerchief was pulled out of his mouth, Wendell began to spin his bullshit.

“Chief Tate!” he bellowed. “Thank god you’re here. Arrest this renegade at once.”

“Which one?” Tate asked.

“Both of them,” Oliver cried. “They’ve destroyed my work, held me hostage against my will, and were illegally trespassing on my property. I want the full extent of the law thrown at them, and these men behind bars for a very long time.”

Tate scratched his nose. “That’s a bit of a problem, Mr. Wendell. You see, I don’t have the warrants.”

“Then detain them until you do. My charges are sufficient for you to hold them.”

Tate nodded. “They are indeed, Mr. Wendell. You do know the law, I’ll give you that. Have you got any witnesses?”

Wendell opened his mouth to speak, but appeared to change his mind at the last moment. “Witnesses?” he said. “I have no need of witnesses. My word is sufficient.”

“Are you sure now?” Tate pressed as he walked toward Oliver. “There was nobody else at your property late last night that may have seen these two trespassers there? Is there no one at all who can corroborate your accusations?”

Wendell swallowed nervously. “No. Nobody. Now do your damn job, Tate, or I’ll have your badge torn off you so fast you’d wish you’d stayed in bed this morning.”

“I already do,” Tate wearily answered.

He stepped over to Billy and Dathan. Billy held his gaze. For the first time, he could see how truly ugly Franklin Tate was. His face was like a tombstone, with pockmarks from an untreated bout of syphilis or who knows what, and tiny beady eyes that darted around like lead shot in a saucer of sour milk. He wished he was partially blind again, just for that moment.

“Billy Hipp.”

“Tate.”

“You’ve been stirring up a whole mountain of shit for me, you know that?”

Billy shrugged. “Nothing personal, Chief. Just doing my job.”

“Uh-huh.” Tate nodded once then stepped over to Dathan. “And you, Master Dathan. Your communication this morning interrupted a very important meeting. Deputy Chief Turner didn’t quite know what to make of it.”

Dathan towered above the bloated Station Chief, and Billy relished the thought that he could squash him like a cockroach if he so chose.

“*C’est la vie, Chief. C’est la vie.*”

Billy smiled and squeezed Dathan's hand. *He does have some balls, my mate.*

"Right."

The station chief withdrew a piece of paper from his vest. "While I have no grounds to detain or arrest either of these gentlemen, Mr. Wendell," Tate said as he turned to face Oliver again, "I do have a warrant here for your arrest."

"Mine? On what grounds?" Wendell barked.

"An eyewitness who came to me last night and reported all sorts of criminal activity that you've been engaged in," Tate said. "For years, it seems."

Oliver Wendell held his chin up high and laughed loudly. Billy noticed how aged he looked in the early morning light. This inventor, this client of his, was not nearly as youthful as he first assumed.

"And who would that be?" Wendell shot back.

"Me." Charlotte said as she emerged from the shadows of the trees. "I went directly to Tate's home after leaving your estate, and told him everything."

"Information which was corroborated by Settembrini," Tate added, "Who's also pressing charges against you for the injuries inflicted on his daughter."

"Aunt Tottie," Dathan said as she embraced him. The bald eagle left her perch and flew down as Charlotte lifted her arm. Dathan's aunt wore a thick leather gauntlet, adorned with brass buckles, that ran all the way up to her elbow.

"Nice glove, Auntie."

"Isn't it, Dathan dear? I hear they'll be all the rage this season."

The eagle landed on her arm and Charlotte brought her in for a kiss and nuzzle.

"Cuff this madman, Turner," Tate ordered. "And get him the hell out of here."

“With pleasure, chief.”

As Turner was leading Wendell off, Billy approached and stood beside his mate.

“There will be a mountain of charges from other shifter parents once word gets out,” Billy said to Tate. “Lana wasn’t his only victim.”

Tate nodded. “Like I said, Billy. You’ve stirred up a heap of shit for me. I reckon there will be multiple life sentences handed down for our little inventor. Shame he’ll only live to serve one of them.”

Billy smiled. “Prepare yourself for a surprise, Chief.”

Tate looked at Billy for a moment. “Your eyes look a bit different,” he said.

“Love works wonders,” Billy said. “You should try it, Chief.”

Tate nodded, a bit confused but clearly he was too tired to seek clarification. Unexpected trips through the forest could do that to an unfit man. Whatever Tate was thinking, for the first time in forever, he kept his thoughts to himself, but Billy didn’t relax until the man, his deputy and the still annoyed Wendell had disappeared from sight.

“And what of Uncle William?” Dathan asked his aunt. “Once he finds out about Wendell’s arrest, he’ll pull his strings and surely have him released.”

“Oh I don’t think so,” Charlotte replied. “Wendell is now toxic to his campaign. He’s already cut the inventor loose, and is planning to promote Tate to Police Commissioner once he’s in the mayor’s office. When you’re as powerful as your Uncle William, Dathan, you can make almost anything happen.”

Charlotte hugged her nephew once more, then gave Billy a kiss.

“William was truly impressed with you last night, Blind Billy Hipp. Despite all his flaws, he loves his nephew and recognized that you do too. You’re in his good books now, for what it’s worth to you.”

Billy shrugged. If it made life easier for Dathan, then it was worth something to him.

“My sister and I are long overdue for a visit, aren’t we dear?” The eagle tilted her head. “See you both back in the city. Maybe dinner tonight?”

“Maybe,” Dathan replied, then whispered to Billy as Charlotte and his mother took their leave, “or maybe not. Unless you want to?”

Billy wrapped his arms around his mate. “All I want is a hot bath, a long sleep, and your body next to mine for the next thousand years.”

“Perfect,” Dathan said. “Your place or mine?”

“Mine’s closer,” Billy replied. “And quieter. And I make a mean stew. You’ll be on bathtub duty.”

“It’s an all-day job, I hear,” Dathan smiled.

“Something like that,” Billy replied as he bent to pick up the leather suspenders. “I’m keeping these,” he said, throwing them over his shoulder. “Who knows when they’ll next come in handy to tie someone up?”

As the two of them walked through the woods towards Billy’s cabin, the Searcher enjoyed scanning his surroundings and taking in his first day with restored sight. Details of the white oak saplings that dotted the perimeter of the forest, the crystal-in-motion of the babbling brook, and the sharp blue curves of the distant mountain range.

He squeezed Dathan’s hand a little bit more as his cabin finally came into view.

It felt good to be home. It felt even better to know he’d always have someone to come home to.

Epilogue

“You are aware there are easier ways of filling a bath,” Dathan huffed as he lugged yet another bucket from the fireplace to the large tin tub that was thankfully big enough for two. “You’ve seen examples of indoor plumbing. Remember those pretty faucets with hot and cold running water? Aunt Tottie and Uncle William are both happy for us to keep using the apartment in the city.”

Billy chuckled. He did that a lot when they were in the shack he called a house. When they were out, which wasn’t often, Billy always walked around as though looking for a fight, but in the cabin he was relaxed and happy. Dathan noticed he was wearing his leather suspenders, although Billy hadn’t bothered with a shirt.

“Are you getting flour on my suspenders?”

“They’ll wipe clean easily enough.” Giving his dough a final punch, Billy smoothed it out into a ball and dropped it in a bowl, throwing a towel over the top of it. “Now,” he said, wiping the flour from his arms and hands with another cloth, before stirring a delicious smelling stew, “is tending that bath too much for my city boy?”

“No.” Dathan mock grumbled, eyeing the water he’d collected. It could do with one more bucket, but if Billy got in with him he wouldn’t need it. Wiping the sweat off his face, because Billy hadn’t been kidding when he said getting a bath running took up most of the day, Dathan dropped the bucket and reached for his shirt buttons.

Two buttons undone and the shirt was over his head, and a flick of another button and his pants fell to the ground. Dathan didn’t wear boots in the cabin. He wasn’t even sure where they were, which wasn’t unusual for him, but living at Billy’s he didn’t need them.

He looked up to see Billy’s heated gaze. “It’s hot work getting this bath filled,” he said with a shrug. “I could heat one more load, although, if you got in with me...” he trailed off.

“I still can’t get enough of the sight of you,” Billy growled, stepping around the battered kitchen table. Seconds later Dathan was arching into his mate’s calloused hands. Billy loved to watch him, but the touches were a sublime addition Dathan couldn’t get enough of.

Hot kisses, hotter hands. Dathan had never believed it possible, finding love in a shack in the woods. Prior to Billy, he’d been happy with his dual life of living in his human form among the mechanics and steam of the city, while running and flying in his horse form in the wilderness. Now, if he wanted to shift, all he needed to do was go outside.

“Gods, we can’t waste the bath,” he groaned, pressing harder against his mate’s body as Billy’s hands started kneading his ass. “My mother said she’d come out this afternoon. We need to clean up.”

That was something else that’d changed. Dathan had a mother who visited now. She was still a bird, and always would be. Like the young wolf shifters Wendell had taken blood from, she couldn’t shift. But now she lived with her sister, no cage in sight. Tottie had become the talk of the town with her ‘pet’ eagle, and apparently even Uncle William had modified his behavior.

Of course, since Wendell’s arrest, Uncle William was busy being mayor and didn’t spend a lot of time at home. But Tottie had shared the tale of his mother pecking a chunk out of William’s head when he’d gotten mouthy one night. Dathan never found out why Tottie had fabricated the story about his mother dying in her arms. She’d just patted his cheek and said, “Wishful thinking my darling boy,” when he’d asked.

“Am I losing my appeal, mate of mine?” Billy nipped his neck.

“No. No.” Dathan wouldn’t say ‘yes’, even in jest. Grabbing Billy’s face in his hands, he said fiercely, “You’re everything to me, Billy Hipp. Everything.”

Steel blue eyes gazed back at him. “I thank the gods every day that I can see your face.” Hot eyes raked up and down Dathan’s naked body. “That I can see all of you.”

Dathan’s cock was cupped in a firm grasp, and he rose on his toes as his butt clenched.

“If you bend over this bath, instead of getting in it, we’ll head to the city next week and see about getting those fancy pipes installed here. What do you say? We have a deal?”

Dathan’s laugh was shaky. “I can’t shake your hand to seal the deal, it’s full. Will you settle for a cock-shake instead?”

Strong hands spun him around, and Dathan leaned over the bath, resting his hands on the rim of the tub. As Billy closed in behind him, Dathan could sense his mother’s presence getting closer.

Give me half an hour, mother, he sent out urgently. Billy has a little matter to take care of before you get here.

His mother’s laughter in his head was drowned out by Dathan’s groan at the thick fingers piercing his hole. Not that he needed much prep.

“I love you enough to get that damned plumbing,” Billy growled as his cock replaced his fingers.

“I love you for that...” Dathan moaned long and low. “Love you always. Oh yes, right there. Right there!”

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And high above the cabin a mother eagle smiled as she caught the wind stream with her wide wings. Her son was happy in love and that was all a mother could wish for. He was loud, too. *He’ll frighten all the wildlife,* she thought as she widened her flight circle. No one would disturb her son and his precious mate while she was in the air. She’d see to that.

The End

I know this wasn’t a story you’d been expecting, but I do hope you enjoyed it anyway ❖❖ I am writing more of what you

are waiting for in the third and final installment of the Magic Users of Greenford trilogy, and I have another hellhound book started, another Quirk of Fates book on the go, and I am almost finished another book in the Arranged Marriages world. And for those of you who have been enjoying those stories, yes that darn pirate has been in my head, but I haven't started his story yet. It won't be long though because he's getting pushy.

In these difficult times, can I ask a favor? If I've made you smile today, can you share that with someone else? Maybe pay a coffee forward, or simply smile as you pass someone in the street. Thank the bus driver, or your uber driver, do something to make the world a brighter space. As I'm typing this we're under a cyclone warning so I figure we could all do with some positivity right now and it's up to all of us, in small ways, to make that happen.

Also, I didn't ask in my last story as it was so short (did you read Saving Moses yet?) but could I impose on you for a short review if you enjoyed this story. Sales are down, and finding new readers is never easy in the MM genre, especially the paranormal sub-genre, so I would truly appreciate it, thank you.

Wherever you are, I hope you are safe. Know that you are loved, and I am thankful for you every day.

Hug the ones you love,

Lisa xxx

About the Author

Lisa Oliver lives in the wilds of New Zealand, although her beautiful dogs Hades and Zeus are now living somewhere else far more remote than she is. Reports indicate they truly enjoy chasing possums although they still can't catch them. In the meantime, Lisa is living a lot closer to all her adult kids and grandchildren which means she gets a lot more visitors. However, it doesn't look like she's ever going to stop writing - with over eighty paranormal MM (and MMM) titles to her name so far, she shows no signs of slowing down.

When Lisa is not writing, she is usually reading with a cup of tea always at hand. Her grown children and grandchildren sometimes try and pry her away from the computer and have found that the best way to do it is to promise her chocolate. Lisa will do anything for chocolate... and occasionally cheezals. She has also started working out, because of the chocolate and the cheezals.

Lisa loves to hear from her readers and other writers (I really do, lol). You can catch up with her on any of the social media links below.

Facebook – <http://www.facebook.com/lisaoliverauthor>

Official Author page – <https://www.facebook.com/LisaOliverManloveAuthor/>

My new private teaser group -

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/540361549650663/>

My MeWe Group - http://mewe.com/join/lisa_olivers_paranormal_pack

And Instagram - https://www.instagram.com/lisa_oliver_author/

My blog - <http://www.paranormalgayromance.com>

Twitter – <http://www.twitter.com/wisecrone333>

Youtube (I am so awful at this lol, but it makes me laugh) -

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuPx1orrUiUHt_ECNaX8SWw and

TikTok - <https://www.tiktok.com/@lisaoliver135> (These could be easier to watch because the videos are shorter lol)

Email me directly at yoursintuitively@gmail.com.

Other Books By Lisa/Lee Oliver

Please note, I have now marked the books that contain mpreg and MMM for those of you who don't like to read those type of stories. Hope that helps ☐

Cloverleah Pack

Book 1 – The Reluctant Wolf – Kane and Shawn

Book 2 – The Runaway Cat – Griff and Diablo

Book 3 – When No Doesn't Cut It – Damien and Scott

Book 3.5 – Never Go Back – Scott and Damien's Trip and a free story about Malacai and Elijah

Book 4 – Calming the Enforcer – Troy and Anton

Book 5 – Getting Close to the Omega – Dean and Matthew

Book 6 – Fae for All – Jax, Aelfric and Fafnir (M/M/M)

Book 7 – Watching Out for Fangs – Josh and Vadim

Book 8 – Tangling with Bears – Tobias, Luke and Kurt (M/M/M)

Book 9 – Angel in Black Leather – Adair and Vassago

Book 9.5 – Scenes from Cloverleah – four short stories featuring the men we've come to love

Book 10 – On the Brink – Teilo, Raff and Nereus (M/M/M)

Book 11 – Don't Tempt Fate – Marius and Cathair

Book 12 – My Treasure to Keep – Thomas and Ivan

Book 13 – Home is Where the Heart is – Wesley and Castor

The Gods Made Me Do It (Cloverleah spin off series)

Book One - Get Over It – Madison and Sebastian's story

Book Two - You've Got to be Kidding – Poseidon and Claude (mpreg)

Book Three – Don't Fight It – Lasse and Jason

Book Four – Riding the Storm – Thor and Orin (mpreg elements [Jason from previous book gives birth in this one])

Book Five – I Can See You – Artemas and Silvanus (mpreg elements – Thor gives birth in this one)

Book Six – Someone to Hold Me – Hades and Ali (mpreg elements but no birth)

Book Seven – You'll Know in Your Heart – Baby and Owen (mpreg)

Book Eight – Worth It – Zeus and Paulie (mpreg)

Book Nine – When Three Points Collide – Ra, Kirill and Arvyn (M/M/M) (mpreg elements, no birth)

Book Ten – Special Enough – Odin and Evan

Book Eleven – Reconciliation: Seth's Story – Seth and Luka (mpreg is a small part of this story)

Book Twelve – Being Loki - Loki and Anubis

Book Thirteen – Give Me A Reason – Helios and Bruno

The Necromancer's Smile (This is a trilogy series under the name The Necromancer's Smile where the main couple, Dakar and Sy are the focus of all three books – these cannot be read as standalone).

Book One – Dakar and Sy – The Meeting

Book Two – Dakar and Sy – Family affairs

Book Three – Dakar and Sy – Taking Care of Business

Bound and Bonded Series

Book One – Don't Touch – Levi and Steel

Book Two – Topping the Dom – Pearson and Dante

Book Three – Total Submission – Kyle and Teric

Book Four – Fighting Fangs – Ace and Devin

Book Five – No Mate of Mine – Roger and Cam

Book Six – Undesirable Mate – Phillip and Kellen

Stockton Wolves Series

Book One – Get off My Case – Shane and Dimitri

Book Two – Copping a Lot of Sin – Ben, Sin and Gabriel (M/M/M)

Book Three – Mace's Awakening – Mace and Roan

Book Four – Don't Bite – Trent and Alexi

Book Five – Tell Me the Truth – Captain Reynolds and Nico (mpreg)

Alpha and Omega Series

Book One – The Biker's Omega – Marly and Trent

Book Two – Dance Around the Cop – Zander and Terry

Book Three – Change of Plans - Q and Sully

Book Four – The Artist and His Alpha – Caden and Sean

Book Five – Harder in Heels – Ronan and Asaph

Book Six – A Touch of Spring – Bronson and Harley

Book Seven – If You Can't Stand the Heat – Wyatt and Stone (Previously published in an anthology)

Book Eight – Fagin's Folly – Fagin and Cooper

Book Nine – The Cub and His Alphas – Daniel, Zeke and Ty (MMM)

Book Ten – The One Thing Money Can't Buy – Cari and Quaid

Book Eleven – Precious Perfection – Devyn and Rex

Book Twelve – More Than a Handful - Karl and Tanner

Spin off from The Biker’s Omega – BBQ, Bikes, and Bears – Clive and Roy

Balance – Angels and Demons

The Viper’s Heart – Raziel and Botis

Passion Punched King – Anael and Zagan

Soul Deep – Uriel and Haures

Found – Raphael and Seir

Demon Masks and Angel Wings – Michael and Orobas

Love Before Time – Lucifer and Gabriel

Arrowtown

A Tiger’s Tale – Ra and Seth (mpreg)

Snake Snack – Simon and Darwin (mpreg)

Liam’s Lament – Liam Beau and Trent (MMM) (Mpreg)

Doc’s Deputy – Deputy Joe and Doc (Mpreg)

Cam’s Chance – Cam and Fergus (Mpreg)

Stone Cold Obsidian – Dian and Kee (Mpreg)

Brutus’s Surprise – Brutus and Heath

City Dragons

Dragon’s Heat – Dirk and Jon

Dragon’s Fire – Samuel and Raoul

Dragon’s Tears – Byron and Ivak

The Magic Users of Greenford – a new trilogy.

Book One - Illuminate

Book Two – Eradicate

Book Three – Validate (coming early 2023)

My Arranged Marriage Fantasy Romance Books (not Fated Mates)

The Infidelity Clause – Nikolas and Caspian

Don’t Judge A Prince by his Undergarments – Mintyn and Sirius

The Reluctant Groom – (Coming early 2023)

Quirk of Fate

Summons – Edward and Mammon

Reggie's Reasons – Reggie and Dirkin

The Mating of Blind Billy Hipp – Billy and Dathan – you just read it 

Quirk of Fates Shorts

Saving Moses – Tucker and Moses

Hellhound Collar Series

Collar and Scruff (Prequel) – Raoul and Jason (Now on Amazon)

Better Than Sweets (Book 1) – Java and Cyril

Precious Blue (Book 2) – Beau and Blue (mpreg elements in last chapter.)

Tangled Tentacles – in Collaboration with JP Sayle

Book one – Alexi – Alexi and Danik

Book 2 – Victor – Azim and Victor (mpreg)

Book 3 – Todd – (MMM, mpreg) Todd, Lucas, and Ki)

Book 4 – Markov – Markov and Cassius

Book 5 – Kelvin – Kelvin and Magnus (mpreg - Markov)

Assassins To Order With JP Sayle

Marvin – Marvin and Ajani (February 2023)

Ben – Ben and others –(due out April 2023)

Standalone:

I Should've Stayed Home: Irwin's Story – Part of the Nocturne Bay collab series – Irwin and Kolton

The Fall of the Fairy Tale Prince – Charlie and Lex (A spin off from Dancing Around the Cop and Change of Plans in the A&O series)

Stay True to Me – Con and Ven

Rowan and the Wolf – Rowan and Shadow

Bound by Blood – Max and Lyle – (a spin off from Cloverleah Pack #7)

The Power of the Bite – Dax and Zane

One Wrong Step – Robert and Syron

Uncaged – Carlin and Lucas (Shifter's Uprising in conjunction with Thomas Oliver)

Also under the penname Lee Oliver/Lisa Oliver

Northern States Pack Series

Book One – Ranger’s End Game – Ranger and Aiden

Book Two – Cam’s Promise – Cam and Levi

Book Three – Under Sean’s Protection – Sean and Kyle

Book Four – Newton’s Law – Newton and Tron