



# FAMILIAR FURY

TESSA FURY,  
ACCIDENTAL BOUNTY HUNTER - 3

NY TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
MARGO BOND COLLINS

# FAMILIAR FURY

TESSA FURY, ACCIDENTAL BOUNTY HUNTER

BOOK THREE



MARGO BOND COLLINS

Familiar Fury

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### **Introduction:**

Hello! Thank you so much for picking up one of my books. I really hope you love it!

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## ABOUT FAMILIAR FURY

**Tessa Fury: half Irish, half Mexican, and 100% Texan supernatural bounty hunter.**

I have purple hair, an anchor tattoo on my chest, a mostly real ex-husband from a mostly fake short-lived marriage, and a completely useless art history degree.

But I have a few other things too.

I have a big fat check from my last supernatural bounty hunt.

I have a stoner best friend who would do anything for me.

Now I also have a brand-new bounty hunter business with a drag queen employee, a sexy werewolf silent partner, and a hot-as-hell bounty hunter mentor.

And a brand-new career stretching out in front of me.

Whether I'm sure I want it or not.

When my sexy mentor Riker Kane asks me to join him on a stakeout watching a vampire he suspects may be the one he's hunting, I'm happy to step up and help him—but then I realize the vampire isn't exactly unfamiliar to me...

## CHAPTER 1



The sun dipped low in the sky, creating an almost blinding glow to the west of the fields north of Dallas, not far outside of Denton.

My two supernatural bounty hunting assistants—my best friend Elijah and his drag-queen partner, Helen Heels—and I stood in a loose formation, nervously encircling the chupacabra that snarled and snapped at us.

The creature looked like a hairless, emaciated dog with nasty fangs and red eyes. Its smell was even worse than its appearance—a mixture of rotting meat and wet fur. I glanced at Elijah and Helen, both tense but ready for action.

“Okay y’all, remember the plan,” I whispered. “We subdue this ugly fucker without getting ourselves killed, okay?”

“Sounds simple enough,” Helen said, flicking her bullwhip with a practiced ease. Her bouffant blonde hair seemed to defy gravity despite the slight breeze that rustled the nearby trees.

I swear, she makes a better woman than I do. I envy that ability sometimes.

“Dude, I can’t believe we’re hunting freakin’ chupacabras now,” muttered Elijah, his floppy blond hair falling into his face. “This job keeps getting weirder and weirder.”

“You didn’t have to take the job,” I reminded him, keeping my gaze on the creature. “But you’re here now—and we got this.”

I took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of grass and earth, trying to ignore the putrid reek of our prey.



As if tiring of our inaction, the chupacabra let out a high-pitched screech and lunged forward, its claws raking through the air.

“Oh, shit!” I shouted, dodging just in time. “It’s faster than I thought.”

Helen cracked her whip at the chupacabra, distracting it from me. The beast snarled and veered its attack toward her.

“Hey, ugly!” Elijah yelled, grabbing the creature’s attention. “Over here!”

Luckily, it wasn’t smart enough to make any kind of sustained attack. Still, our carefully planned circle had turned into a chaotic dance of dodging and weaving as we tried to avoid the monster’s sharp claws and gnashing teeth. My heart pounded in my chest, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

I was glad my bounty-hunting mentor, Riker Kane, couldn’t see this mockery of a capture—he made this kind of shit look so easy.

And damn, did he ever look good doing it.

“Y’all,” I panted, “we need to do something before this thing turns one of us into a snack.”

Helen snapped her whip again. The chupacabra yelped in pain, momentarily stunned.

“Okay, y’all,” I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. “Let’s go for the legs. Once it’s down, we can restrain it.”

“Got it,” Elijah said.

“Darling, you better believe I’m ready,” Helen added, giving her whip an intimidating crack.

As the chupacabra shook off the effects of Helen’s whip, it glared at us with its rage-filled eyes.

I took a deep breath, tasting the dust in the air and feeling the tension radiate off of Elijah and Helen. The chupacabra snarled, its fangs bared and dripping with saliva, as it prepared to lunge at us once more. It charged, and we sprang into action. I dove to the side, narrowly avoiding its snapping jaws,

while Elijah tackled one of its hind legs. Helen's whip wrapped around another leg, yanking it out from under the creature.

"Ugh, this thing smells worse than my ex's cologne," I muttered, struggling to get a grip on the chupacabra's thrashing body.

"Tessa," Elijah grunted, wrestling with the beast's powerful limbs.

"Sorry—it's just foul." I finally managed to grab hold of one of the chupacabra's front legs.

"Less talking, more restraining." Helen wrapped her whip around the creatures' other limbs.

As we fought, I considered our ragtag group. Compared to actual professionals, we were like the knockoff cereal that came in a plastic bag next to the real deal—full of sugar and probably unhealthy, but still getting the job done. Mostly.

At least, that's how I liked to think of us.

"Almost got it," I panted, sweat mingling with the dirt on my face. Heat emanated from the chupacabra's skin as it growled and struggled beneath us.

"Okay, on three," Elijah said. "One... two... three!"

On his count, we worked together to flip the chupacabra onto its back, pinning it down with all our combined strength. I glanced up at Helen, who was breathing heavily but still looked absolutely fabulous.

Shoving my hand into my pocket, I pulled out the bottle of subduing dust Riker had given me for this hunt. I managed to get it open and dump half the bottle onto the creature's face.

"Okay, just a little bit more, and we'll have this thing under control," I said, hoping that my optimism wasn't misplaced. The chupacabra continued to squirm beneath us, but with each passing second, its movements grew weaker.

Finally, the chupacabra lay subdued, its blood-red eyes glaring at us with impotent rage. I exhaled deeply. "Elijah, do you have the rope?"

“Right here.” He moved over to where he’d dropped it during the struggle, then wrapped it around the chupacabra’s legs, calf-roping style.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” I asked.

Elijah snorted. “I took ag in high school, remember?”

I’d forgotten that—having spent most of our senior year stoned, he’d needed an easy A to bring his overall GPA up enough to graduate.

“Good job, y’all,” I said, smiling at my friends. “Let’s get this monster locked up and call it a day.”

Helen stepped back, whip in hand, to stand a few feet away from the chupacabra, ready to intervene if the thing woke up. She narrowed eyes framed by flawless makeup.

It was amazing how she managed to keep up appearances even during the most intense situations.

“Okay, Elijah, let’s lift this thing off the ground on three,” I said, my heart pounding with adrenaline. “One... two... three!”

Elijah grunted as we hoisted the chupacabra into the air. “Dude. It’s heavier than it looks.”

Helen expertly lashed her whip around the creature’s neck, pulling it tight enough to keep it secure but not so tight that it would strangle the beast. The chupacabra hissed and snarled, but it was too weak to move.

Pride for our little team made me smile. We were an odd bunch, but somehow, we made it work. “Now, let’s transport this ugly sucker to the authorities.”

As we headed back toward the highway, I suddenly realized something.

“Oh, crap. Do we really have to put it in my car?” I complained, only half-joking. My Kia had been through a lot, but I wasn’t sure if it could handle the stench of a chupacabra.

“Unless you want to carry it all the way back to Dallas, then yes.” Elijah rolled his eyes at me.

I sighed, resigning myself to the inevitable odor that would cling to my car's upholstery—probably for weeks. We carefully maneuvered the chupacabra to the backseat.

“Okay, in you go,” I said, shoving the chupacabra into the backseat with a mixture of disgust and satisfaction. The beast snarled one last time before we slammed the car door shut, effectively trapping it inside.

I exhaled noisily, wiping the sweat from my brow. “I can't believe we actually caught the chupacabra.”

“Believe it, sister,” Helen said with a grin, flicking her whip triumphantly. “Looks like we've got the makings of a pretty badass supernatural hunting team.”

I snorted. “Yeah, well...here's hoping we get better from here.”

Elijah nodded. “No way to go but up.”

I slid into the driver's seat and crinkled my nose in disgust, knowing full well that the stench would linger for days. “I don't think any amount of air freshener is going to get that smell out,” I complained as I rolled down the windows and turned on the car's air conditioning.

“Hey, at least you're in the front seat,” Elijah retorted, shooting me a pointed look. “One of us has to sit in the back with it.”

“Yeah, you two need to decide who's riding in the back.”

Helen leaned over and grabbed two long blades of grass from the ground. “We'll draw straws. Short straw gets the pleasure of sharing the backseat with our new friend.”

Elijah gave a resigned sigh and reached for one of the grass blades. He pulled out the shorter one and groaned dramatically. “You've got to be kidding me.”

“Sorry, love,” Helen said sweetly, patting him on the shoulder before climbing into the passenger seat. “Better luck next time.”

Elijah grumbled, reluctantly opening the back door and sliding in next to the chupacabra. “Dude,” he said as I turned on the

ignition and pulled onto the dirt road, “This thing is seriously killing my appetite.”

Somehow I doubted that. Elijah was like a black hole into which food disappeared, never seeming to make a difference in his weight—or his hunger.

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MY NAME IS TESSA FURY, AND I’M BOUNTY HUNTER OF ALL things supernatural, dangerous, and outside the law—not because I ever planned to be. I just kinda fell into it.

After I graduated from high school, I went to a fancy college in California where I got a degree in art history.

And after college graduation, I went on a celebratory week-long Vegas bender, where I ended up with a tattoo of an anchor just above my right boob, courtesy of my brand-new husband, a just-discharged sailor I accidentally married sometime during that bender. I pretend not to remember his name.

Soon after that, I came home to Dallas with both my college diploma and my divorce decree in hand, and my parents gave me my old bedroom.

That didn’t last any longer than my marriage. My mother started pushing me to get a job. But that degree was useless in terms of finding real work, so I started cataloging my skills.

Turns out I have an ability to hold my drink from my Irish father and sassy attitude come from my Mexican mother. And a tendency to do something that seems fun at the time, then spend the next six months—or longer—untangling the mess it made. That last bit is all me. And my purple hair is straight from a Walmart hair-dye shelf.

Last October, when the national center for supernatural bounty hunters put out a bounty on a Dallas werewolf, my stoner friend Elijah convinced me to take up paranormal bounty hunting despite our serious lack of experience or equipment.

We helped save a billionaire werewolf from a bogus murder charge and solved a supernatural crime in the meantime—a local cop who was summoning hellhounds and setting them loose to kill. And along the way, I gained a mentor in bounty hunting.

That billionaire werewolf, Niko Savas, helped set me up in my own business—he’s technically the silent partner, which means he gets a percentage of the money we make—and the mentor, Riker Kane, still helps me out when I’m stuck. Which is more often than I want to admit.

Both Niko and Riker are insanely hot.

They’ve both kissed me.

And I don’t know what the hell to do about either of them.

Luckily, I didn’t have to think about that tonight. The chupacabra had been a witch’s familiar, and she had set it free to run wild and wreak havoc when she’d been taken in for selling illegal charms—the business of magic had become highly regulated since the normal human world had learned of its existence more than a dozen years ago, and not all practitioners were on board with the change.

So it had been a straight-up monster hunt. Nothing to it.

Or so I’d been told.

As we pulled up in front of the holding station for supernaturals, I breathed a sigh of relief. This reeking beast was about to be someone else’s problem.

“Let’s get this over with,” Helen muttered, grabbing her whip and preparing to drag the chupacabra out of the car.

I grabbed a pair of surgical gloves from the glove compartment, wishing I’d thought to wear them during the capture. I didn’t want to touch the thing any more than necessary.

The three of us managed to haul the chupacabra into the station without much trouble, though it was clear that its presence wasn’t exactly welcome. The officer on duty

wrinkled his nose as he took our statement and inspected the creature.

“Can’t say I’ve seen one of these up close before,” he said, looking both intrigued and repulsed. “You sure know how to bring in the, uh, interesting ones, Tessa.”

“We aim to please,” I said with a grin, trying not to think about the lingering smell that would likely follow us for days. “Anything to keep things interesting around here.”

With the chupacabra securely in the hands of the supernatural police, the three of us climbed back into my car, ready to put this adventure behind us.

“Phew,” Elijah sighed, cracking open a window as we pulled away from the station. “Glad that’s over with. Let’s just hope our next target doesn’t smell quite so...ripe.”

I swallowed convulsively as we pulled into the strip mall where our office was located, trying to control my gag reflex at the smell. The scent of the chupacabra seemed to have attached itself to the very fibers of my car’s upholstery. I was glad to leave its confines.

Our office, sandwiched between a health food store and Stillman’s Janitorial Supplies and Perfume, was a still-unmarked space that we’d hastily converted into our supernatural bounty hunting headquarters. It wasn’t much, but it was ours.

“Maybe Stillman’s has some kind of industrial-strength air freshener we can steal,” Elijah suggested with a lazy grin. “Or, you know, actually buy.”

I unlocked the door and stepped inside. The mismatched furniture and haphazardly hung artwork might not scream “professional” to most people, but for us, it was a symbol of our newfound purpose.

Before we could make any headway on our search for an air freshener, my phone buzzed insistently from its spot on the desk. Glancing down, I saw Riker Kane’s name flash across the screen, and felt a familiar thrill.

“Hey Riker, what’s up?” I tried to sound casual as I answered, but there was no denying the way my heart sped up just a little at the sound of his voice.

“I need your help on a stakeout,” he said without preamble. “Something big is going down tonight, and I could use an extra pair of eyes.”

“Of course! I mean, sure, we can do that.” I scrambled to regain my composure, shooting a glance at Elijah and Helen, who were watching me with twin expressions of amusement.

“I don’t need the rest of the team,” Riker said. “Just you.”

My cheeks heated. “Okay.”

“Great. I’ll text you the details.”

“Wait,” I blurted out before Riker could disconnect the call. “I’ll meet you, but only after I take a shower.” The last thing I needed was to show up smelling like chupacabra.

“A shower? Nice. Take your time.” Riker’s tone held a hint of amusement. “But not too much time—we don’t want our target slipping away.”

My heart fluttered in my chest as I hung up and stuffed the phone into my pocket. Damn it, why did Riker have to be so attractive?

“Looks like I’ve got another job lined up,” I announced, trying to sound more nonchalant than I felt. My mind was already racing ahead, wondering what kind of supernatural creature we’d be facing this time—and whether it would smell any better than the last one.

I made my way to the bathroom connected to the back office—which had, to my delight, come with a small, built-in shower. I guess someone had delusions of corporate CEO grandeur when they’d remodeled the space.

The lukewarm water of the shower did little to wash away the grime from the chupacabra encounter, but it was better than nothing. I scrubbed at my skin vigorously, trying to erase the lingering smell that clung to me like an unwanted guest. My



purple curls dripped water onto my anchor tattoo as I towed off and pulled on fresh clothes.

“Shower’s all yours,” I announced as I emerged from the bathroom, water still dripping from my hair. Helen and Elijah exchanged a glance but didn’t comment on my haste.

I grabbed my bag of equipment and headed for the door.

I jumped into my car, grimaced, and rolled down all the windows.

At least the wind would dry my hair before I got to Riker.

Despite the horrific chupacabra smell, I reflected, life as a supernatural bounty hunter was anything but dull.

And deep down, that’s just how I liked it.

## CHAPTER 2



**T**he moment I walked into the dimly lit bar, my eyes were immediately drawn to him—Riker Kane, a paranormal bounty hunter who looked like a younger and paler, but just as muscular, version of Dwayne Johnson, was sitting at the counter. His muscular arms bulged against the sleeves of his tight black T-shirt, and I marveled at the way he seemed to command attention even in this crowded, noisy place.

“Hey,” he greeted me, flashing his sexy smile—the one that sent shivers rolling down my spine—with a smoldering intensity that made my heart race. “Ready for our next assignment?”

“Definitely,” I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. As a supernatural bounty hunter-in-training, I was eager to prove myself, but I knew I still had a lot to learn. Especially from someone as experienced and skilled as Riker.

“Let’s get going then,” Riker said, leading the way out of the bar. We stepped into the night air and walked over to his giant black pickup truck, which looked almost as intimidating as its owner.

As we got in the truck, Riker wrinkled his nose slightly, and my heart skipped a beat.

Dammit. I knew I hadn’t gotten all the chupacabra stench off me.

“Everything okay?” I asked hesitantly, hoping he hadn’t noticed anything amiss.

Riker started the engine. “Just thought I caught a whiff of something... unusual.”

“Unusual?” I tried to keep my voice steady, but it wavered just a bit. “What kind of unusual?”

“Never mind,” he said with a casual shrug. “Probably just my imagination.”

As we drove through the dark city streets, I couldn’t deny that Riker’s presence both thrilled and intimidated me, but I was not going to let that get in the way of my training.

“I know I still have a lot to learn about being a bounty hunter,” I said, breaking the silence, “but I want you to know how much I appreciate your guidance.”

He glanced over at me, a hint of surprise in his eyes. “It’s not often I find someone who’s as dedicated as you are. It takes time to hone your skills, but I have no doubt that you’ll get there.”

I smiled.

But then...

“You been hunting a chupacabra lately?” Riker asked.

Heat rose to my cheeks.

I quickly sniffed at my hands, trying to detect any lingering traces of the repulsive odor. Riker chuckled, his laughter rich and warm like hot chocolate on a cold winter night. “Don’t worry,” he assured me, “it’s barely noticeable.”

“Wonderful,” I muttered under my breath.

We soon arrived at our destination—a budget motel along I-35. Riker parked the truck away from any streetlights, leaving us shrouded in darkness. From our vantage point, we had a perfect view of room 232, its door slightly ajar.

“Okay,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant despite my nerves. “Who are we hunting tonight? What kind of bail-jumper is this?”

He glanced at me with a strange expression, as if debating whether or not to share the necessary information.

“This isn’t the usual bail-jumping case, is it?” I asked as I tried to wrap my head around the information in the file.

He shook his head, his eyes never leaving room 232. “We’re not hunting an official bounty tonight. I’ve been hired as a police consultant to help track down a vampire who’s supposedly here in Dallas.”

I felt the color draining from my face. A vampire? “A killer?” I whispered.

“An active one,” Riker confirmed. “Suspected in the murder of several humans. It’s gotten the attention of the local authorities, and they want our help.”

I swallowed hard, trying to push away the fear clawing at me. I could handle chupacabras and other creepy creatures, but vampires terrified me in a whole different way.

“We’re just supposed to find this vampire and report it,” he said. “That’s all. No confrontations or anything like that.”

His warning look made it clear that he didn’t want me to do anything reckless.

*Believe me, I thought, I’m totally on board with doing nothing.*

“Let’s find this vampire and report it.” I forced a smile onto my face.

“Here,” Riker said, handing me a manila folder filled with information on the vampire we were supposed to find. “You should know who we’re looking for.”

I took the file from him, my fingers brushing against his warm skin as the sound of crinkling paper filled the cab of the truck. My heart raced, but I couldn’t decide if it was from our close proximity or the danger we might face.

“Thanks,” I murmured, just as the door to room 232 creaked open.

A tall man with curly blond hair and a lean, predatory build stepped out into the dimly lit parking lot. He glanced around cautiously before heading down the outside staircase and toward a black car parked nearby.

“Is that...?” I trailed off, unable to finish my sentence. The shock rooted me in place, making it nearly impossible to tear my eyes away from the man.

“Open the file,” Riker urged, giving me a nudge. I blinked, realizing that I had been holding my breath.

The vampire retrieved something from the car, then headed back to his motel room.

Fumbling with the folder, I managed to pry it open. It revealed a series of photos and documents detailing the vampire’s appearance, habits, and possible whereabouts. As I skimmed the information, it only confirmed what I already knew deep down.

“That’s him. That’s the vampire,” I choked out, struggling to keep my voice steady.

“Thought so.” Riker’s expression serious. His grip on the steering wheel tightened, betraying his growing tension.

My hands trembled as I clutched the file, the gravity of the situation hitting me like a punch to the stomach.

We had found the monster we were hunting.

But I knew something about him Riker didn’t.

My mind raced with possibilities and questions, each one more terrifying than the last.

“Okay, let me call it in.” Riker pulled out his cell phone, preparing to dial the police.

“Wait,” I exclaimed, my hand shooting out to grasp his muscular forearm. The warmth of his skin momentarily distracted me, but I quickly recovered. Still, the truth tasted bitter on my tongue, like the dregs of a cheap wine. “We can’t involve the police. There’s too much at stake.”

He raised an eyebrow, confused and annoyed. “Why not? We found him, didn’t we?”

“Seriously, Riker. You can’t call the police.” Taking a deep breath, I tried to prepare myself for what I was about to reveal.

“That vampire... Oliver Novak? Yeah... he’s my husband.”

## CHAPTER 3



The instant the words left my mouth, I knew I'd made a mistake. Riker's eyes widened in shock, and he stared at me like I was some kind of alien creature. I could practically see the gears turning in his head as he tried to process what I'd just told him.

"Your... husband?" he asked slowly, disbelief dripping from every syllable. "You're telling me that *vampire* is your *husband*?"

"Ex-husband," I corrected quickly, feeling my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

I didn't know why I'd blurted it out. I never talked about my disastrous marriage, especially not with Riker, who already doubted my abilities as a paranormal bounty hunter.

But there was something about seeing Oliver's pale face framed by the darkness that had made me panic.

"Ex-husband?" Riker repeated. "You were married?"

"Once upon a time," I muttered, trying to sound casual while my heart thudded in my chest. "To the human version of Oliver. Before he turned, apparently, into a blood-sucking fiend. We met in Vegas, got married a week later, and then got divorced just a little while after that."

Riker glanced back up at the room where we'd spotted Oliver, but the vampire had vanished inside again—for now, at least. When Riker looked at me again, there was a new understanding in his eyes, mixed with a healthy dose of skepticism.

“Let me get this straight,” he said, folding his arms across his muscular chest. “You married a man you barely knew in Las Vegas, then divorced him, then he became a vampire, and now he’s wanted for murder?”

“More or less.” I felt incredibly small under Riker’s intense gaze. I played with the hem of my shirt nervously, revealing a glimpse of the anchor tattoo on my chest—a permanent reminder of my impulsive past.

“Wow,” Riker said, shaking his head. “Life really does have a twisted sense of humor, doesn’t it?”

“Tell me about it,” I sighed, my mind racing with thoughts of Oliver and the danger he posed—not just to his potential victims, but to me, too.

“Fine. We’ll deal with this. But you need to tell me everything you know about Oliver. No secrets.”

I nodded, swallowing hard. “I’ll tell you everything I know.”

“Start from the beginning.”

Just as I opened my mouth to tell my story, Oliver stepped back outside—and this time, he slid into the car. The engine purred to life, and he began to drive away.

“Damn it,” Riker muttered. “We need to follow him.”

He started the truck and slid out onto the road behind Oliver, staying several car-lengths behind him.

“I’ll watch him,” Riker said. “You talk.”

“Okay,” I sighed, my fingers tapping nervously on my thigh. “Here goes nothing... Oliver and I met during what you might call a ‘weeklong bender’ in Vegas,” I began, wincing at the memory. “He’d just gotten out of the Navy and was... well, he was attractive and fun. Seemed like the perfect way to celebrate graduating from college, you know?”

“Of course,” Riker said dryly, keeping his eyes on the road as he followed Oliver’s car. “Because nothing says, ‘congratulations’ like drunkenly marrying a stranger.”

“Hey, don’t judge,” I shot back, though my cheeks burned hot. “I never claimed to be smart when I’ve had a few too many tequila shots.”

Riker shook his head, but I could see the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “So after your wild Vegas wedding—”

“Officiated by an Elvis impersonator, if you must know,” I interrupted, feeling the need to defend myself. “It wasn’t like we were trying to make a serious commitment or anything.”

“Right,” Riker said, smirking. “Anyway, after the wedding, what happened?”

“Oliver and I went back to California together,” I said.

“Sounds like a real whirlwind romance,” Riker commented.

“Trust me, it wasn’t,” I assured him. “Just a wild mistake made by two impulsive people who barely knew each other.”

“Clearly,” Riker said, his focus returning to the road. “So now that we’ve got your tragic love story out of the way, what about Oliver? What can you tell me about him that might help us catch him before he hurts anyone else?”

I chewed on my lip, trying to think of anything useful about my ex-husband—anything that could give us an edge in this surreal game of cat and mouse. But my memories of Oliver seemed hazy and distant, like they belonged to someone else entirely.

The Dallas skyline twinkled in the distance like stars caught in a net of steel and glass. Riker maneuvered our car expertly through the streets, never losing sight of Oliver’s taillights.

“Oliver and I went back to California together, after the Vegas fiasco,” I said, watching the cars around us blur into streaks of color as we sped along. “We tried to make it work, but we just... didn’t.”

“Didn’t what?” Riker asked, his gaze focused on the road.

“Didn’t click, I guess.” I shook my head, trying to put into words the strange dissonance between us. “It’s like we were



two puzzle pieces that looked like they should fit together, but the edges were all wrong.”

“Sounds frustrating,” he commented, taking a sharp turn that made me grip the door handle.

“Beyond frustrating.” I suppressed a sigh. “I mean, don’t get me wrong—there were good times. But the bad times just... outweighed them, you know?”

“Trust me, I’ve been there,” Riker said with a knowing nod. “So, what happened then?”

“Eventually, I filed for divorce,” I explained, watching the familiar Texas landscape roll by outside the window. “It took another two months to finalize everything, and then I came back home.”

“Home to Texas, where everything is bigger, including the supernatural problems,” Riker joked, a smirk playing on his lips.

I didn’t answer, too busy worrying about what Oliver was doing here.

“Don’t worry,” Riker said, his voice cutting through my thoughts like a knife. “We’ll figure this out. Whatever’s going on with your ex, we’ll get to the bottom of it.”

The streets whizzed by in a blur, the hum of Riker’s engine melding with my racing thoughts. Our pursuit of Oliver had become almost surreal—but there was no turning back now.

“Hey,” Riker said suddenly, his eyes flicking to my chest for a moment before returning to the road. “Is that anchor tattoo because of your fling with the sailor?”

I gave a wry grin. “Got it right after our wedding, courtesy of another Elvis impersonator—this one was a tattoo artist. Vegas really is something else.”

“And you’re sure he wasn’t already a vampire when you married him?”

“No. I would’ve noticed if my husband had fangs and a penchant for blood, trust me. I have no idea when or how he was turned.”

“Guess we’ll find out soon enough,” Riker murmured.

I bit my lip anxiously. “I know you have to report Oliver’s whereabouts to your police contacts, but can we hold off on that for just a little while?”

He glanced at me, his eyebrows raised in surprise. “Why?”

“Because something doesn’t add up,” I insisted, my fingers tapping nervously against the seat. “I don’t believe Oliver is involved in whatever’s going on. We need to figure out the truth before we bring him in.”

Riker’s jaw tightened, and I could see the internal battle he was fighting. “You know how dangerous this could be, right?” His voice was strained. “I mean, we’re talking about a vampire here, not some petty thief.”

I didn’t answer, just stared at him.

Rain began pattering down. We tailed Oliver through the dark streets of Dallas, the city lights reflecting off puddles like eerie mirrors. I felt the tension in the air, thick and electrifying, but Riker broke the silence.

“We’ll try it your way,” he said, watching Oliver’s car up ahead. “But if I see him attack anyone, I’m stepping in and turning him in, got it?”

“Deal,” I replied without hesitation, twisting a strand of purple hair around my finger. I was still learning the ropes, so I knew how important it was to trust Riker. His experience and skill were unmatched, and I admired him.

*Admire...among other things,* a little voice inside my head murmured.

*Shut up,* I told it.

The rain intensified, making it harder to see through the windshield. I squinted, trying to make out any details that might give us a clue about what was going on.

As we trailed behind Oliver, I wondered what had happened to the man I had married so impulsively.

How had he become a vampire?

It seemed impossible that the charming, carefree man I had once known could be capable of the atrocities detailed in the dossier I still held in my lap.

So why was he now wanted for murder?

## CHAPTER 4



The bright lights of the HEB grocery store cast a warm glow across the parking lot as Riker and I trailed behind Oliver.

“Of all places for a vampire to go,” Riker muttered. “A grocery store? What’s he going to buy—tomato juice?”

“Maybe he needs garlic to keep other vampires away?” I offered. Riker snorted at my lame attempt at humor.

“Okay, here’s the plan.” Riker pulled his truck into a parking spot near Oliver’s car, his eyes never leaving Oliver’s figure as the vampire left his vehicle and entered the store. “I’m worried there might be a human back at his motel room. Maybe he’s luring them there, and that’s why he’s shopping.”

“Right. Because everyone knows humans can’t resist HEB deals.” I rolled my eyes but nodded in agreement. It made sense, considering what appeared to be Oliver’s track record with murder.

“Stay here and keep an eye on him. Call me when he leaves the store, okay?” Riker’s voice was firm, and I knew better than to argue. As much as I hated to admit it, he was the professional bounty hunter, and I was ... well, I was me.

“Got it, boss.” I gave him a mock salute and got out of the truck, waving as he sped off toward Oliver’s motel.

Now it was just me, the well-lit grocery store, and my blood-sucking ex-husband.

I moved into the shade of a tree planted in one of the islands in the lot, hoping the shadows would hide me, and waited.

I grew bored quickly. Besides, I couldn't see the store entrance from under the tree.

I wondered what Oliver was doing in there. Was he buying food for a potential victim?

Or maybe he had turned over a new leaf and taken up cooking as a hobby?

Yeah, right. Vampires and cooking. The thought made me snicker.

*Get it together, Tessa.*

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my thoughts and focus on the task at hand. I had to watch Oliver like a hawk, or Riker would never let me live it down.

I scanned the parking lot, searching for a hiding spot that would allow me to keep an eye on the grocery store's entrance. The bright fluorescents from the storefront illuminated the area, making it hard to find a decent place to lurk. I muttered a curse under my breath in a mix of Spanish and English, knowing full well that my mom would have scolded me for such language.

Finally, I settled on crouching behind a large SUV parked a few rows away from the store. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than standing out in the open like a neon sign advertising my presence.

Besides, from here, I could see the store's entrance without difficulty.

"Guess I'll just wait then," I muttered, shifting my weight impatiently from one foot to the other. My mind wandered to Riker, wondering if he'd found anything interesting back at Oliver's motel room.

Knowing him, he'd probably already caught a werewolf or two on his way there.

As the minutes dragged on, boredom chewed at me like a hungry wolf.

My impatience grew, and I glanced over at Oliver's car sitting innocently a couple of lanes away.

A mischievous grin spread across my face as an idea formed.

*Why not?* I thought. *After all, it's not like I have anything better to do.*

With a final glance at the store's entrance, I made my way to Oliver's car, keeping low and using other vehicles as cover. When I reached it, I tried the door handle, fully expecting it to be locked. To my surprise, it clicked open easily.

"Seriously?" I whispered incredulously. "A wanted vampire leaves his car unlocked? What is this, amateur hour?"

My curiosity piqued, I slid into the driver's seat and took a moment to survey my surroundings. The interior smelled faintly of leather and the coppery scent of old blood, a chilling reminder of who this car belonged to.

"Okay," I muttered, trying to shake off the choking dread that crawled up my throat. "You're not here to critique his choice in air fresheners. Let's see what Mr. Bloodsucker has been up to."

I glanced once more toward the store entrance, making sure Oliver wasn't about to walk out and catch me red-handed.

*So far, so good.*

With a deep breath, I began my search, hoping to find something—anything—that might give me an edge over my ex-husband.

I rifled through the glove box, center console, and even under the seats, all the while keeping a watchful eye on the store's entrance. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary—just the usual assortment of car paraphernalia: maps, insurance papers, and some old fast-food wrappers.

I did have to wonder who'd been eating the food, of course.

"Come on, Oliver," I muttered. "Give me something juicy here."

Frustrated with my lack of findings, I hopped out of the car and eyed the trunk. With a shrug, I decided it couldn't hurt to take a peek. As I popped the trunk open, I was greeted by the sight of two small gym bags nestled among some spare blankets.

"Let's see what you're hiding," I said quietly, my fingers wrapping around the zipper. As a last precaution, I glanced back at the store once more before reaching for one of the bags.

And did a complete double-take when I realized Oliver was walking out through the sliding glass doors.

My eyes darted around the parking lot in desperation, searching for anything that could save me from being caught. And then it struck me—a risky, crazy idea that just might work.

Heart pounding, I hoisted myself up and over the edge of Oliver's trunk, pulling it nearly shut above me as I crammed my body into the small space. I squeezed in among the gym bags and spare blankets, praying that Oliver wouldn't try to stow his single grocery bag in the trunk too.

My chest heaved with every breath, and I fought to keep my emotions in check, reminding myself that this was part of the job—even if it was a bit more absurd than usual.

*Please don't let him need the trunk. Please don't let him need the trunk,* I chanted silently, trying to slow my racing heart. The sounds of the parking lot were muffled within the confines of the trunk, but I held my breath, straining to hear any indication of Oliver's approach.

*Stay calm,* I told myself, drawing on my limited experience as a supernatural bounty hunter for strength. *You can do this, Tessa. You've faced worse things than hiding in your vampire-ex-husband's trunk.*

I couldn't actually think of any of those worse things right now...but I felt sure they existed.

As I waited, I wondered how my life had come to this point—stuffed into a car trunk, hunting a vampire I'd once married

during a wild Las Vegas bender.

Moments like these made me question my career choices.

*You need to be ready for anything*, I scolded myself, pushing away the memories and trying to stay present.

I listened intently, my entire body tense with anticipation. The anchor tattoo above my boob itched as if it knew about the danger I was in. The seconds ticked by, each one like an eternity.

And then, finally, I heard it—the unmistakable sound of Oliver’s footsteps approaching. My heart leaped into my throat as his shoes crunched on the gravel just outside the trunk.

*Please don’t open it, please don’t open it*, I thought frantically, my grip tightening on the edge of the trunk lid. The suspense was almost unbearable, but I forced myself to remain still and silent, praying that my impulsive plan would pay off.



## CHAPTER 5



**W**hen I heard the car door open and then the motor started, I blew out a sigh of relief.

The trunk of Oliver's car was like a casket, dark and cramped.

But the ride was bumpier, I suspected.

My breathing echoed off the metal walls as I tried to stay as quiet as possible, gripping my phone tightly in my hand. The last thing I wanted was for him to hear me with his supernatural vampire hearing. One slip-up could mean doom for me.

I hastily typed out a text to Riker, my fingers trembling slightly:

So. Funny story...

I'm currently in Oliver's trunk, and we're headed away from the grocery store.

Don't worry, though!

Everything's under control.

Sort of.

I hit send and hastily turned down the volume on my phone, hoping Oliver hadn't heard anything. Seconds felt like hours as I waited for a response, my heart pounding against my anchor tattoo.

TESSA!

Riker's reply came in all caps.

ARE YOU CRAZY? WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?

Then, after a brief pause, another message arrived:

Do you know where you are?

I rolled my eyes, trying not to let his outrage affect me.

*Oh, sure, Riker. Yell at me for being resourceful,* I thought sarcastically.

I didn't dare type that out—I wanted him to come rescue me. So instead, I responded with a simple answer.

No idea. It's dark in here.

As I re-read our texts, I felt a mix of embarrassment and pride.

On one hand, I'd managed to track down my vampiric ex-husband and infiltrate his car.

On the other hand, I was now trapped in said car and relying on help from the very man who doubted my abilities as a supernatural bounty hunter.

If there were ever an award for the most ironic situation, I think I'd win hands down.

My heart pounding, I decided it was time to figure out where we were headed. I hadn't shut it completely, so I gently lifted it open a crack, just enough for me to peek outside without making too much noise. The city lights blurred by as I tried to make sense of our surroundings. It looked like we might be heading back toward the motel where Oliver had been staying, but I couldn't be certain.

I texted Riker, my fingers shaking with adrenaline as I typed.

Maybe going back to the motel.

Can't be sure.

His reply came quickly.

Great.

Luckily, I put a tracking app on your phone last time we worked together.

Just in case.

I huffed, half-angry and half-relieved. It felt like a violation of privacy—but it could very well save my life right now.

Trust Riker to have taken such a step without informing me.

I texted back, rolling my eyes even though he couldn't see me.

Of course you did.

Glad to know you have so much faith in me.

His reply made me shake my head.

Not about faith. It's about being prepped.

“Thanks... I guess,” I muttered under my breath, trying to focus on the positive aspect of his words.

My mind raced with thoughts of what I'd do when the car stopped, how I'd confront Oliver, and whether or not Riker would arrive in time to help.

As the car continued to speed through the night, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

Okay. So maybe it was the fact that I was stuffed into a trunk with two mysterious gym bags, or maybe it was the looming knowledge that my vampire ex-husband was only inches away from me. Either way, my sense of disquiet grew with every passing minute.

I texted again, my fingers trembling.

Don't know what's going to happen when this car stops, but please be ready to help me.

he responded, and for the first time since this crazy plan started, I felt a small, comforting warmth in my chest.

Always.

The car jolted as it went over a speed bump too fast, and the trunk slammed shut with a heart-stopping bang. I cursed under my breath, my heart pounding in my ears as I fumbled with my phone, turning on the flashlight function to search for the emergency handle again.

*Come on, where are you?* The light finally fell upon a small, red handle near the top of the trunk. *Bingo.*

I reached up and pulled on it with all my strength, but nothing happened. I tried again, yanking harder, but it remained stubbornly unresponsive. Apparently, Oliver had disabled the handle somehow, leaving me trapped inside the trunk.

I cursed under my breath and quickly typed out a text to Riker.

Trunk slammed shut. Emergency handle disabled. Stuck in here.

Riker's incredulous response came immediately.

SERIOUSLY?

Then, after a few minutes, he continued.

Hang tight. Coming for you.

Suddenly feeling very vulnerable and small, I responded.

Thx.

As much as I wanted to be a strong, independent, totally badass supernatural bounty hunter, I kept having moments like these.

And Riker, despite his teasing and occasional impatience, was always there to lend a hand.

*You're just stuck in a trunk, I told myself. Riker will get you out.*

I began to explore my surroundings more thoroughly, searching for any other possible way out. But as I did so, my mind wandered to Riker—his strong arms, his confident presence, and the way he seemed to believe in me even when I doubted myself.

*Jeez, Fury. Get it together.*

The car continued to twist and turn down unexpected roads, the journey lasting far longer than it should have taken to reach the motel.

I decided to take advantage of the time I had trapped in this trunk.

“Let’s see what you’re hiding, Oliver,” I muttered, shifting my focus to the two gym bags lying beside me.

Unzipping the first bag, I found stacks of cash bound together with rubber bands—thousands of dollars, at least. My heart raced as I wondered how on earth my vampire ex had come across so much money.

*Riker’s gonna love this,* I thought, already imagining his shocked expression. But there was no time for that now. I quickly moved on to the second bag.

As I opened it, my stomach churned at its contents.

Duct tape, rope, and a knife.

My mind reeled as I tried to make sense of it all.

Why would a vampire need these things?

*Is this some kind of murder kit?* I wondered.

The thought made me swallow convulsively, but I fought down my nausea. I was a supernatural bounty hunter, after all—even if I wasn’t the best one around. I needed to get used to seeing terrible things.

With trembling hands, I fumbled for my phone and snapped pictures of the gym bags and their unnerving contents, then sent the picture to Riker.

He didn't respond, and I had to wonder if he'd lost us in traffic. Then a new message popped up, letting me know the pictures hadn't gone through.

This was bad.

Potentially very bad.

*Oliver, what are you planning?* The question seemed to float in the trunk beside me, unanswered and unsettling.

Well, whatever Oliver was up to, I couldn't let fear hold me back.

So I took the knife out of the bag and held it in my right hand, switching my phone to my left.

*Besides, I thought, if I'm going to be stuck in a trunk with a murder kit, at least I have a weapon now.*

With the knife secured in my hand, I prepared myself for whatever might happen next.

Oliver may have had supernatural strength on his side, but I wouldn't go down without a fight.

Maybe the cash and murder kit were clues to Oliver's mysterious plans. Or maybe they were just another layer in this twisted game he seemed to be playing with me.

As if on cue, the car jolted to a stop, throwing me off balance and slamming my phone against the trunk wall. The screen flickered dangerously, but thankfully, it stayed intact.

“¡*Mierda!*” I hissed under my breath, trying to catch my bearings. The sudden halt left me disoriented, and every muscle in my body tensed in anticipation. This was it; the moment I'd been dreading since I'd first climbed into this godforsaken trunk.

I willed my heartbeat to slow down.

Silence stretched out like a suffocating blanket, and my ears strained to catch any sign of movement outside the car. I held

my breath, every part of me screaming for action, but I forced myself to stay still, poised like a predator waiting to strike.

*Come on, Oliver, I thought, my grip on the knife tightening. Show yourself already.*

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, I heard it—the faintest sound of footsteps crunching on gravel. They approached the trunk slowly, deliberately, as if they knew I was waiting inside. My heart pounded in my ears, drowning out everything else, but I refused to give in to fear.

With the knife clenched in my hand and dread swirling in my chest, I braced myself for whatever—or whoever—was about to confront me. And as those footsteps drew ever closer, I thought of Riker and all the times he'd believed in me when no one else would.

*Here's hoping you're right about me, Riker, I thought, my eyes narrowing. Because I'm about to show this vampire ex-husband of mine that Tessa Fury is not someone to be trifled with.*

The sound of gravel crunching underfoot had me on high alert, my heart pounding like a jackhammer in my chest. My fingers wrapped tightly around the knife's handle, knuckles white with tension. I knew one thing for sure: if Oliver dared to open that trunk, he'd find out just how much his ex-wife had learned since their Vegas days.

The footsteps grew closer, and I braced myself, ready to strike at a moment's notice.

## CHAPTER 6



The instant the trunk popped open, I lunged out, knife in hand, ready to strike. But before I could make contact, Riker's strong grip closed around my wrist, stopping me mid-air.

"Whoa, it's just me!" he said, staring down at me with a mixture of annoyance and amusement.

"Riker! You scared the hell out of me," I huffed, trying to catch my breath. He helped me out of the trunk, and as I stood up, I realized we were in the motel parking lot—the same one we'd surveilled Oliver in earlier. The shadows seemed to dance around us, hiding us from view. "Why are we back at the motel?"

Riker ignored my question. "What happened to laying low and staying out of trouble?"

"Trouble has a way of finding me," I grumbled, awkwardly brushing myself off. "Anyway, I found these gym bags. One is full of cash, and the other... well, see for yourself."

As Riker examined the bags, his expression grew serious. "This doesn't add up, Tessa. Why would Oliver need this stuff? He's a vampire, for crying out loud."

"Your guess is as good as mine." I shoved the knife into my back pocket. "But I'm not waiting around to find out. We need to get out of here before he realizes we've been snooping in his things."

I guess I should have been glad of Riker's help, even if it meant being shoved into a trunk like some mafia kidnapping. I



glanced at him, taking in the way the moonlight reflected off his pale skin. It was hard not to feel drawn to him, despite my irritation.

“Next time, maybe give me a little more warning?” I suggested as we reached his truck, again hidden in the shadows. “You know, so I don’t try to stab you accidentally.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Riker smirked, opening the passenger door for me. But I could see something else in his eyes, hidden beneath the amusement. He was serious about keeping Oliver away from me, even if it meant putting himself in harm’s way.

“Ha-ha,” I replied, climbing into the truck.

“Damn,” Riker muttered as we settled into the cab, and he stared at his phone. “According to the tracking app, Oliver took a really circuitous route back to the motel. He might suspect he’s being followed.”

“Great, so not only is my ex-husband a murderer, but he’s also paranoid and cunning?” I sighed, raking my fingers through my unruly purple curls.

“Seems like it.” Riker’s muscular arms flexed as he gripped the steering wheel. “If we’re not gonna call in his location to the police, then we need to set up 24-hour surveillance on him.”

I tried not to dwell on how vulnerable I’d been hiding in that trunk.

“Fantastic,” I muttered. “Any chance you can get a supernatural monster-slaying babysitter for me?”

“Very funny.” Riker shot me an amused glance, but his eyes held a hint of concern. “We’ll figure something out. We need to stay one step ahead of him.”

“Right, because that’s been working out so well for us so far.” The sarcasm dripped from my words, but deep down, I knew he was right.

I stared out the windshield. Shadows stretched out from the nearby trees, making them look like sinister claws reaching for

us.

“What if we call Niko?” I suggested, hoping to break the silence that had settled between us. “He might have some resources we can use, maybe even some extra manpower.”

An irritated expression flitted across Riker’s face, and tension radiated from him. “Fine,” he said, his voice tight. “But you make the call.”

“Okay...” I said, confused by his sudden change in demeanor. Pulling out my phone, I dialed Niko’s number, and thought about the time we’d spent together—his gorgeous blue eyes, the way he held me protectively. And then there was Riker, with his strong arms and steadfast certainty. My heart raced at the thought of them both.

And that’s when it hit me: that was why Riker didn’t like Niko.

Jeez. An awkward love triangle was the last thing I needed on top of everything else—but I couldn’t deny the chemistry that seemed to spark between me and each of the men.

“Hey, Tessa!” Niko’s cheerful voice pulled me from my thoughts. “What can I do for you?”

“Uh, hey Niko,” I stammered. “We need some help setting up surveillance on a vampire—the dangerous kind. Can you help?”

“Of course,” he said, not missing a beat. “I’ll get a team together and meet you as soon as possible. Where should we meet up?”

“Thanks, Niko. You’re a lifesaver,” I said. Then I gave him the address and hung up the phone.

Relief washed over me as I slipped my phone back into my pocket. Niko’s willingness to help us put my mind at ease, but there was still a lingering tension in the air. I glanced over at Riker, who was leaning back against the headrest with his arms crossed, a brooding expression on his face. I could see his annoyance as he clenched and unclenched his jaw, staring out the truck window.

“Okay, he’s going to send help,” I said, attempting to sound casual. “We just have to wait.”

“Great,” Riker grumbled, his tone a fair imitation of Niko’s werewolf-influenced tones as he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

The silence that settled between us had lost its comforting quality from earlier. Instead, it felt suffocating, like an unspoken argument waiting to erupt.

I sighed, watching the tension in his shoulders and knowing that our current situation wasn’t just about Oliver anymore. The dance of attraction between us had become another layer of complexity, one that would need to be addressed sooner rather than later.

But for now, we had a vampire to catch.

I shifted in my seat, trying to break the tension with small talk.

“Have you ever thought about how strange our lives are?” I asked, biting my lip. “I mean, we hunt down creatures of the night for a living. It’s like we’re stuck in some kind of paranormal reality show.”

Riker didn’t seem amused by my attempt at humor. He sighed and glanced at me, his eyes narrowed. “I know what you’re trying to do, but don’t. We both know what’s bothering me.”

“Fine,” I huffed, folding my arms. “But Niko is my business partner, Riker. There’s nothing more to it than that.”

“Is that so?” Riker asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Besides, it’s not like there’s anything between you and me, either.”

“Fine,” Riker conceded, relenting slightly—though his jaw remained tight. “But you can’t blame me for being concerned about you.”

“Concerned?” I asked. “Or jealous?”

Riker actually growled, gripping the steering wheel tighter. “It’s not jealousy. It’s... caution. In our line of work, it’s important to know who you can trust. Niko may have been

cleared of his ex-wife's murder, but that doesn't mean he's an angel."

"Neither are any of us," I pointed out, trying to keep my voice level. "Our world is full of shades of gray."

"And he's a werewolf. That alone makes him a danger."

"Yet, right now, we need Niko's help."

"Okay," Riker acknowledged with a reluctant nod. "But I still don't like him."

"Point taken," I said, settling back into my seat as the silence returned—still uncomfortable, but at least the air had been cleared somewhat.

"Let's just focus on catching Oliver," Riker suggested. "We can deal with the rest later."

I nodded, staring out the window into the darkness. For now, hunting supernatural monsters was our priority, and the tangled web of relationships could wait.

The tension in the truck seemed to thicken as we waited for Niko's team to arrive. I tried my best not to fidget, but my fingers tapped on my thigh, betraying my nerves. Riker continued to brood, his gaze fixed on some distant point outside the windshield.

"Thank goodness," I breathed when a black SUV pulled into the parking lot across from the motel, cutting through the darkness with its headlights. Four men dressed in dark tactical gear stepped out and approached us. I felt a small sense of relief—maybe now Riker would snap out of his sullen mood.

"Let's do this," Riker muttered, pushing the truck door open and stepping out to greet the team. I watched as he quickly relayed instructions to them, his authoritative presence commanding their full attention.

"Keep an eye on Oliver's movements," he ordered, handing the team leader the file folder with the dossier. "Room 232. And report anything suspicious immediately."

"Yes, sir," the leader of the team replied, nodding firmly before they all dispersed back to their vehicle.

Climbing back into the truck, Riker started the engine. “Let’s get you back to your place,” he gritted out. As we drove off, I considered how protective he was being over me. It could have been endearing if it hadn’t been so damned annoying.

We didn’t speak all the way home.

“You really don’t have to walk me in,” I protested half-heartedly as we parked outside my apartment building. “I’m sure Oliver doesn’t even know where I live.”

“Better safe than sorry,” he said gruffly, hopping out of the truck and coming around to open my door. For a moment, I wondered if this was just another attempt to assert dominance over Niko’s involvement, but I chose to push that thought aside.

“Fine,” I conceded, allowing him to lead me up the steps and unlock my apartment door. As we entered the dimly lit space, Riker examined the surroundings, his senses on high alert.

“Looks like you’re safe,” he finally declared after he had checked every room, relaxing slightly as he turned to face me. “Just make sure you keep your doors locked and call me if anything happens.”

“Thanks,” I said, attempting a smile that felt more like a grimace. “I appreciate it, really.”

I walked Riker toward the door, my heart pounding a little faster than I would’ve liked. The silence between us crackled with tension. As he reached for the doorknob, something seemed to snap within him.

“Dammit,” he muttered under his breath before spinning around and pushing me up against the wall. His body pressed against mine, trapping me between the solid wall and his muscular frame. My eyes widened in surprise, but before I could say anything, Riker’s lips crashed onto mine.

I gasped, my hands instinctively finding their way to his broad shoulders. But instead of pushing him away, I found myself pulling him closer.

My thoughts were a whirlwind of confusion, desire, and something else I couldn’t quite put my finger on. At this

moment, all that mattered was the burning connection between us, the way our bodies seemed to fit together as if they were made for each other. I hooked one leg up and around him.

My mind drifted to Niko, and I froze, wondering why the thought of him brought such a sharp pang of guilt.

Riker pulled back enough to search my eyes.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

I hesitated, torn between my undeniable attractions to both Riker and Niko.

But in the end, there was no denying the raw magnetism between me and Riker, the way I craved his touch. It was like hunting a supernatural monster—the adrenaline and danger made it all the more thrilling.

“More than okay,” I said softly, leaning in to capture his lips once more.

The taste of Riker’s lips lingered even as he pulled away, his eyes darkened with a mix of passion and what looked like regret.

Without another word, he turned abruptly, yanking the door open and stepping out into the night, leaving me breathless and leaning against the wall.

My heart was hammering in my chest, my body still humming with need, and I felt a sense of loss as Riker disappeared from sight.

“Damn it,” I muttered, pushing myself off the wall locking the door behind him.

I paced restlessly around my small apartment. The silence seemed to mock me, reminding me of the sudden emptiness that had settled over it now that Riker was gone.

“Get a grip,” I scolded myself, shaking my head to clear it of the lingering haze of desire. “You’ve got bigger problems than your messed-up love life.”

But my thoughts kept drifting back to Riker—how his lips had tasted like a mix of danger and sweet temptation.

I groaned, rolling my eyes at my own inability to concentrate.

“You’ve dealt with vampires, werewolves, and all kinds of supernatural creatures,” I told myself aloud. “You can handle a little romantic drama.”

And though part of me still ached with desire and the lingering sting of what felt suspiciously like rejection, I had more important things to do.

Like figuring out what the hell Oliver was doing in town.

And nothing, not even a passionate encounter with my infuriatingly attractive mentor, was going to stand in my way.

## CHAPTER 7



S ometime late in the night, a floorboard creaked in the darkness, jolting me awake. My heart leaped into my throat as I watched the shadows around me for any sign of movement. Cursing myself for not keeping a weapon nearby, I vowed never to make that mistake again.

I made plans, discarding them almost as quickly as I came up with them.

If only I hadn't left the knife I'd stolen from Oliver's murder kit in Riker's truck—but I hadn't wanted to end up explaining why I had a murderer's kit-weapon in my apartment. I figured Riker was better suited to making those kinds of explanations.

My gaze darted around the dim room, settling on a tall lamp in the corner. It would have to do.

I silently rolled out of bed and tiptoed over to it, unplugging it from the wall. With each cautious step, I wished I was wearing something more substantial than my barely-there PJ shorts duo.

*Of all the nights to dress like a Playboy Bunny,* I thought, feeling exposed and vulnerable.

As I positioned myself behind the closed bedroom door, lamp held aloft like some makeshift medieval weapon, I tried to ignore the invasiveness of the air against my bare legs and focused instead on the potential intruder.

The only thing standing between them and me was a flimsy wooden door, and I prayed they'd take one look at my wild



purple curls and underestimate me. I'd always been petite, but I knew how to pack a punch when necessary.

*Come on, I told myself. You hunt supernatural monsters for a living. You can handle one creeper dude in your apartment.*

I listened intently for any signs of movement outside the door, my pulse pounding in my ears. Fear coursed through my veins, mixing with adrenaline. As I stood there, gripping the lamp tighter, I wondered what my parents would think of this situation.

*Maria Fury's daughter, hiding behind a door with a lamp as a weapon, I mused. She'd have a field day with this one.*

"Ay, Dios mío," I imagined her saying, throwing her hands into the air and shaking her head in exasperation. "Couldn't you have at least put on some decent clothes first?"

*Sorry to disappoint you, Mami, I silently told her with a grim smile. But I'm about to teach this intruder they messed with the wrong supernatural bounty hunter.*

The door creaked open slowly, and I tensed, ready to strike. The moment the intruder stepped into my room, I leaped out from behind the door, lamp raised high above my head. "Surprise, *hijo de puta!*" I shouted, bringing the lamp down with all my might.

"Whoa, Tessa!" A familiar voice snapped as a strong hand shot out, grabbing my wrist and stopping my blow in midair. My attacker flicked on the light switch, and I blinked at the sudden brightness, realizing it wasn't an attacker at all.

A mix of relief and embarrassment washed over me.

"Damn it, Niko! What are you doing here? This is the second time tonight I've nearly attacked an ally!" I lowered the lamp but still clenched it tightly. "Both times, I might add, because y'all were sneaking up on me like freaking cat burglars. You need to work on your entrances." I scowled at him.

"Sorry about that." He sounded sincere, but there was a hint of amusement in his eyes. "I didn't mean to scare you." He glanced at my lamp. "But you should really consider investing in a proper weapon for situations like this."

“Thanks for the advice.” I rolled my eyes. “I’ll be sure to add that to my list of ‘Things To Do When Random Werewolf Billionaires Break Into My Apartment.’”

“Are you always this feisty in the middle of the night?” Niko asked, raising an eyebrow and looking me up and down. His gaze lingered on my skimpy outfit, and I suddenly felt very exposed.

“Only when people sneak into my apartment uninvited,” I said defensively. “What do you want?”

“Can’t a guy just check on a friend?” Niko asked.

“Checking on me? Did it not occur to you to knock?” I hissed. My heart was still racing from the adrenaline rush, and my wrist throbbed where he had gripped it.

“Sorry,” Niko said. “I wanted to make sure you were okay after everything that happened today.”

“How did you get in?” I demanded, narrowing my eyes at him. “Did you pick the lock or something?”

“Does it matter?” He dodged the question with a sly grin that made me grit my teeth in frustration.

I sighed. “Look, I appreciate the concern, but in the future, please try knocking or calling first, okay?”

“Sure.” He grinned.

“Fine,” I grumbled.

“Also, I wanted to let you know that your ex-husband hasn’t left his motel room all night.”

“You couldn’t have called with that information?”

“Get some sleep.” Niko grinned, pushing away from the wall and heading for the door. “You’re going to need it.”

“Wait,” I called after him, my brain finally catching up with everything he’d said. “What do you mean, ‘I’m going to need it?’”

“I suspect things are about to get interesting,” Niko replied cryptically, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

*Interesting* was not the word I would have chosen.

“Hey,” I said, narrowing my eyes at him. “How the hell do you even know Oliver is my ex-husband?”

Niko just grinned, revealing those annoyingly perfect teeth of his. “With enough money, it’s possible to learn almost anything.”

“Great,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. “I’ve got a stalker billionaire werewolf on my hands. Just what I always wanted.”

“Come on,” Niko said, leaning against the doorway with an amused expression. “You know I’m not stalking you. I’m simply... keeping an eye on things.”

“Right. Because that’s so much better. Anyway,” I continued, trying to regain some semblance of control over the situation, “Oliver is a murder suspect, but I don’t believe he’s guilty. There are enough willing blood donors for vampires that they don’t have to kill, and I don’t think he has it in him to commit murder, anyway.”

Niko’s gaze turned thoughtful, studying me intently as if trying to discern the truth behind my words. It was unsettling, the way his blue eyes seemed to pierce through my defenses, making me feel even more vulnerable than before.

“Maybe you’re right,” he finally conceded. “But if there’s even a chance that he’s involved in something dangerous, shouldn’t we find out for sure?”

I let out a sigh, running a hand through my hair. “Fine. Just... be careful, okay?”

Niko’s eyes narrowed as he considered my words, the blue depths of them seeming to search for something hidden within me. He remained silent for a moment, leaving me to wonder what thoughts might be flickering through his mind like shadows on a moonlit night.

“I’ll make sure everyone stays safe,” he finally said. “Including you.”

As I started to ask him if he’d learned anything else about my ex-husband, Niko’s gaze suddenly shifted downward. A

mischievous glint appeared in his eyes, and I could see the corners of his mouth twitching upwards into a grin.

“Nice choice of sleepwear,” he teased, his eyes lingering on my barely-there pajama shorts and matching top. “Very... revealing.”

My cheeks flushed with a mix of embarrassment and annoyance. Trust Niko to find a way to distract me from the pressing matters at hand by commenting on my attire—or lack thereof.

“Can we focus, please?” I snapped, crossing my arms over my chest in an attempt to shield myself from his prying eyes.

“Okay, okay,” he chuckled, raising his hands in surrender. “But seriously, go back to bed. We can talk more tomorrow.”

His tone was authoritative, and it grated on my nerves. What gave him the right to order me around like that?

My irritation bubbled up, an unwelcome heat rising in my cheeks. Glaring at him, I opened my mouth to give Niko a piece of my mind when he suddenly closed the distance between us in two strides. His hand snaked around my waist, pulling me into his solid embrace, while the other cradled the back of my head.

“Wha—” My protest was cut short as his lips settled onto mine, drowning out any further words. The kiss was passionate, demanding, and surprisingly tender all at once. My initial shock melted away, replaced by a hunger that matched his own.

As Niko deepened the kiss, one hand tangling in my wild curls, I wondered if this was truly happening. His scent of pine and leather filled my senses, anchoring me to the surreal moment. His touch sent heat coiling down to my core, but it was his raw intensity that left me breathless.

For a fleeting moment, I was certain we’d cross a line I hadn’t even realized existed. But just as quickly as it had begun, Niko pulled away, leaving my lips tingling and my thoughts scattered.

“Damn it,” he muttered, his eyes dark with an emotion I couldn’t quite place. Without another word, he released me, turned on his heel, and strode out of the apartment, leaving me stunned and immobile in the center of the room.

I blinked a few times, trying to process what had just happened. My heart raced, my body still thrumming from the intensity of the kiss. But beneath the lingering desire, annoyance flared anew. Why would he do that, only to leave so abruptly?

“Unbelievable.” I rested my hands on my hips as I replayed the scene in my head. “I’m getting a guard dog,” I muttered under my breath.

I heard him chuckle in response.

*Damn werewolf hearing.*

Then the apartment door clicked shut, leaving me in a bewildering silence. It took a moment for my brain to catch up with the whirlwind of events that had just transpired.

“Two men,” I muttered, shaking my head as the absurdity of it all settled in. “Both kissing me and cursing about it.”

I glanced around the room, taking in the disarray from our scuffle and the lingering scent of Niko’s aftershave. How was I supposed to sleep after all this? But with a resigned sigh, I decided that trying to make sense of the chaos would have to wait until morning.

“Tomorrow,” I whispered as I crawled back into bed, pulling the covers up to my chin. “I’ll figure it all out tomorrow...”

## CHAPTER 8



**M**y dreams that night, when they finally came, were a mix of dark shadows, flashes of fangs, and the heat of strong arms pulling me close.

I didn't sleep well, to say this least.

The dappled morning light filtered through the blinds as I walked into the office the next day. I rubbed my temples, trying to keep the memories of last night's kisses at bay.

But even as I tried to ignore them entirely, my heart fluttered like a hummingbird, reminding me that things were now more complicated than ever.

"Good morning, darling," Helen greeted me with her usual dramatic flair. In today's ensemble, she wore a fiery red dress paired with matching stilettos, her blonde bouffant hairdo accentuating her striking features. The scent of her floral perfume wafted through the room.

No one could rock an entrance quite like Helen Heels—even when it wasn't her entrance.

"Hey, Helen." I tried to sound nonchalant. "Where's Elijah?"

"Back office, sorting out some paperwork," Helen said, eyeing me worriedly. "You look like you've seen a ghost, honey. Are you all right?"

"Um, yeah..." I hesitated, my fingers fidgeting with the hem of my shirt. I bit my lip, reluctant to spill everything just yet.

"Elijah!" Helen called out without waiting for my response. "Get your stoned ass out here, Tessa has something important

to tell us!”

Elijah emerged from the back room, his hair falling across his forehead and his perpetually stoned expression firmly in place. “What’s up?” he asked, perching himself on the edge of a desk.

“I don’t even know where to begin,” I said, running my fingers through my hair. I glanced at my two closest friends, feeling a knot of anxiety forming in my stomach.

“Take a deep breath,” Elijah suggested.

I exhaled slowly. “Last night, Riker and I went on a stakeout for a vampire-related murder case.” I paused, trying to find the words to explain how my past had come back to haunt me.

Elijah’s eyebrows shot up, and he leaned forward, intrigued. “A vampire?” he asked, sounding a little too excited for my taste.

“Unfortunately, yes,” I said. “The vampire we were watching... It’s my ex-husband.”

Helen gasped, her hands flying up to cover her perfectly painted lips. “Seriously?”

“Wait, hold on,” Elijah said, his confused expression barely changing. “You were stalking your ex-vampire husband last night?”

“Stakeout, not stalking,” I corrected him, rolling my eyes. “And yeah, Riker and I were watching him. He’s the main suspect in the murder.”

“Damn,” Helen murmured, shaking her head in disbelief. “You sure know how to pick ’em.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” I muttered. “Anyway, Riker has Oliver under surveillance now—or rather, Niko put a team in place, but under Riker’s command. We’re trying to gather more evidence before making any moves.”

“Under surveillance?” Elijah questioned, his interest piqued even further. “Like, full-on PI style?”

“Something like that,” I replied vaguely, deciding not to mention the whole hiding-in-the-trunk-of-Oliver’s-car fiasco. They didn’t need to know just how far I’d gone to keep tabs on my bloodsucking ex.

“Let’s see what we can dig up on this murder,” Helen said, her fingers flying over the computer keyboard as she accessed the new database for supernatural crimes. I leaned against the edge of the desk.

“Here it is,” Helen announced after a few moments. “Bloody hell, Tessa... it’s bad. It happened in California, and it was... well, it was horrible.”

“Tell me everything,” I insisted.

“Okay,” Helen began, reading from the screen. “The victim was a young woman, drained of blood and left in an apartment. There were signs of torture before death, too.” She glanced at me sympathetically. “Oliver is the only suspect because he was seen fleeing the scene. They found his fingerprints all over the place.”

I swallowed hard, trying to reconcile the charming man I’d once fallen for with the monster they were describing.

“Wait, there’s more,” Helen continued, never looking away from the screen. “When Oliver fled the scene, he was carrying a small statuette. The authorities seem especially interested in that object.”

“Statuette?” I echoed, my interest piqued despite the gruesome details we’d just uncovered. “What kind of statuette?”

“Unfortunately, there isn’t much information on it,” Helen said, frowning. “But it’s got to be important if they’re so fixated on it.”

“Maybe it has some sort of power,” I mused, thinking back to the supernatural artifacts I’d heard of during my short time as a bounty hunter. “Or maybe it’s just valuable.”

“Could be,” Helen said, her tone thoughtful. “Either way, it’s another piece of the puzzle.”



“Dudes, you know what?” Elijah said. “Maybe that object is actually magical, like Tessa says, and Oliver isn’t wanted for the murder. Maybe they’re after him because he has a powerful item.”

Helen and I exchanged glances, considering the possibility. It wasn’t the craziest idea Elijah had ever come up with—despite being high. Again.

I nodded thoughtfully. “It wouldn’t be the first time someone’s been hunted down for possessing a magical artifact.”

“Exactly!” Elijah said, a spark of excitement in his bloodshot eyes. “So, what does this statuette look like, Helen? Is there a description or a picture in the database?”

“Let me see…” Helen tapped away at the keyboard. After a moment, she began to read a description aloud. “It says here that the statuette is about six inches tall, made of an unknown metal alloy with intricate carvings covering its surface. The figure it depicts is vaguely humanoid but with elongated limbs and a twisted, almost serpentine body.”

A chill shuddered through me as I imagined the strange, otherworldly statue. What kind of power could it hold, and why would Oliver risk everything to steal it?

“Okay, let’s brainstorm,” I suggested, leaning forward in my chair. “What do we think this thing could do, magically speaking?”

Elijah rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Well, since it’s a sort of snake-like humanoid, maybe it could give the user some kind of shapeshifting abilities. Or maybe control over snakes?”

“Or maybe it has some sort of mind-control power,” Helen added, her eyes narrowing as she considered the implications. “I mean, imagine what someone could do with that kind of ability.”

“True.” My gut twisted at the thought. theorize all day. We need to find Oliver and that statuette before anything else happens.”

We delved deeper into our theories, each possibility more frightening than the last.

“Maybe it has some kind of resurrection power,” Elijah suggested. “Like, bringing back the dead or something.”

“Oliver’s already undead,” I pointed out, trying to make light of the situation. “I doubt he’d need a magical artifact for that.”

“True, but maybe it’s not about him,” Helen said. “What if he’s planning on using it for someone else? Or worse, something else?”

“Or maybe he’s just trying to keep it away from whoever wants it,” I mused, my fingers tapping nervously on the table. “I mean, this thing has to be dangerous if people are willing to kill for it.”

Just as our conversation grew almost unbearable, the shrill ring of my cellphone cut through the tension like a knife. Glancing at the screen, I saw Riker’s name flash across the display and quickly answered.

“What’s going on?” I asked, my heart thudding in my chest.

“There’s been another murder,” Riker said, his tone tight with urgency. “It’s exactly like the one in California.”

“Another murder?” I repeated, my blood running cold at the thought of Oliver possibly being involved. “Where is it? What happened?”

“Same M.O. as before,” Riker said grimly. “Bloody, brutal, and the only thing missing is that damn statue. You need to get down here now.” He paused. “Bring your team. I don’t know that we’ll need them, but the more eyes, the better.”

“Okay,” I said, grabbing my coat and bag. “Give me the address.”

He gave me the information. “And...be careful.”

“Always am,” I said, trying to sound confident despite the fear roiling through my guts.

As I ended the call, I turned to Helen and Elijah. “Riker needs help.”

“We heard—another murder. Be safe,” Helen urged, her own worry evident in her expression.

“He wants you there, too,” I said, taking a deep breath to steady myself.

Helen’s eyes widened. “Really? That’s so cool!”

I rolled my eyes at her excitement.

“Well? Come on,” I said, knowing that every second counted in our race to stop Oliver and unravel the mystery of the deadly little statue.

## CHAPTER 9



Outside, Helen, Elijah, and I piled into my Kia.

“Ugh,” Helen groaned, wrinkling her nose as she settled into the passenger seat. “It still smells like chupacabra in here.”

“Sorry,” I muttered, a touch embarrassed by the lingering odor. “I’ve tried everything to get rid of the smell.”

“Dude, don’t worry about it,” Elijah said from the backseat. “We’re used to it by now.”

“Speak for yourself,” Helen huffed, rolling down the window with dramatic flair. I snickered at her antics as I started the engine and pulled out of the parking spot.

We drove toward a small apartment complex near Lower Greenville in Dallas. The honking of car horns, the laughter of the few pedestrians on the sidewalk, and the rhythmic bass from passing vehicles melded together to create the familiar soundtrack of urban chaos. Despite my growing concern about Oliver’s situation, I found some comfort in the lively energy around us.

“Okay,” Helen said, breaking me free from my thoughts. “What’s the plan when we get there? Are we going in subtle or making an entrance?”

“Subtle.” I glanced at her through the rearview mirror. “The last thing we need is to draw attention to ourselves.” I could practically feel Helen’s pout given her love for grand entrances.

“Fine,” she sighed dramatically, crossing her arms. “But if things go sideways, I’m letting loose with my bullwhip.”

“Works for me.” A small grin tugged at the corner of my lips. I knew she’d find a way to use her weapon of choice regardless of my input—though Riker’s presence might put a damper on her enthusiasm.

As we turned onto a side street, the apartment complex came into view. Its beige brick exterior and modest landscaping hinted at a well-maintained but unremarkable building. The perfect place for anyone trying to keep a low profile.

“Remember,” I said, turning off the engine and looking at my closest friends. “Subtle.”

“Got it,” they echoed in unison, though Helen’s smirk suggested that her definition of ‘subtle’ might differ from mine.

We stepped out of the car and walked toward the complex. The metal gate creaked as it swung open, revealing a small courtyard.

“Is it just me, or does this place feel like a scene from a horror movie?” Helen whispered, her voice almost blending the wind rustling through the trees.

“Definitely getting those vibes,” Elijah said.

As we approached the back of the complex, Riker’s imposing figure came into view. He leaned against the wall outside a ground-floor apartment, arms crossed over his chest. Even in the shadows, I could sense his intense focus, like a predator waiting for its prey.

“Hey, Riker,” I said, trying to hide the fact that his stare reminded me of our kiss—and that made my nipples harden. “What have you got for us?”

“Another murder, possibly connected to Oliver,” he said. “The victim was found with severe head trauma, but no visible bite marks.”

“Oliver wouldn’t do something like that…” I muttered under my breath.

*Is it possible he's being framed?*

Before I could ask the question aloud, a crime-scene tech emerged from the apartment, adjusting his gloves as he approached us. "You're cleared to enter, Mr. Kane. Just be careful not to disturb any evidence."

"Thanks," Riker nodded, pushing off the wall and stepping toward the door. He paused, glancing back at me. "You up for this?"

I swallowed hard, my heart pounding in my chest. This wasn't my first time at a crime scene, but the personal connection to the case made it different—more terrifying. Still, I couldn't let fear hold me back, not when Oliver's fate was at stake. "Yeah. Let's do this."

"Wait here," Riker instructed Helen and Elijah, who nodded. I followed him into the apartment, my hand instinctively reaching for the small vial of holy water tucked inside my jacket pocket—just in case.

"Gear up," Riker said, handing me a pair of booties, gloves, and a hairnet. I quickly pulled the protective gear on, feeling like an extra from a low-budget thriller movie.

As we entered the small apartment, the air felt thick with foreboding.

"Dear God," I choked out, my eyes widening at the sight before me. The blood was everywhere—splattered across the walls, pooling on the floor, and even staining the ceiling. It felt like walking into a horror film gone awry, but there was no director yelling "cut" to end the scene.

"Never gets any easier," Riker murmured, his gaze trained on the lifeless body sprawled in the center of the room. The victim's head was caved in, surrounded by a halo of crimson gore. It was a grisly image that would haunt my nightmares for weeks to come.

"Definitely not," I whispered, struggling to keep my composure. My stomach churned as I surveyed the carnage, but I refused to show any weakness.

Riker leaned in closer, examining the body with a professional eye. “No bite marks,” he confirmed. “This doesn’t seem like a vampire’s style.”

“Maybe it wasn’t Oliver,” I suggested, hope flaring in my chest, and said aloud what I’d been thinking. “Could someone be framing him?”

“Anything’s possible,” Riker said. “But we need more evidence before we can draw any conclusions. Keep your eyes peeled for anything that might help us piece this puzzle together.”

“Got it.” I nodded, glancing around the blood-soaked tableau.

“Look, if this is too much for you, you can step outside,” Riker said. “I won’t think any less of you.”

I swallowed back the bile that rose in my throat. “I need to be here.” I glanced around the apartment and then leaned in toward Riker. “Can I take some photos? Just in case we find something later?”

He nodded. “Don’t be obvious. We don’t want to draw attention.” With that, he strode off to speak with the lead detective, leaving me to navigate the grisly scene on my own.

As I moved carefully around the apartment, I pulled out my phone and snapped photos of anything that seemed even remotely relevant. The splatters of blood on the walls, the overturned furniture that implied a struggle, the shattered remnants of what had once been a coffee table. Each image made me shudder, but I forced myself to keep going.

I inched closer to the body, my heart pounding in my chest. The sight of the man’s lifeless form was enough to make anyone queasy, but for me, it was more than that. I needed to get a clear shot of his unbitten neck and bashed-in head—evidence that might just prove Oliver’s innocence.

“Hey, watch where you’re stepping!” a crime scene tech snapped, making me jump.

“Sorry,” I muttered, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible while snapping a few photos with my phone. It wasn’t easy—between the blood spatter on the walls and the

unnerving way the man's eyes stared blankly at nothing, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched by more than just the people in the room.

"Looks like blunt-force trauma to the head," one of the cops muttered to his partner as they examined the body from a safe distance. "Poor guy never stood a chance."

Blunt-force trauma? Riker was right—that didn't sound like a vampire killing at all.

Vampires were known for their fangs and their penchant for draining their victims dry—not bashing in their skulls in with a blunt object.

Could it truly be possible that someone else had committed this crime and left Oliver to take the fall?

"Got everything you need?" Riker asked, finishing up his conversation with the lead detective.

"Think so," I said, swallowing hard. My stomach churned with a mixture of revulsion and apprehension, and I couldn't decide if it was from seeing the gruesome aftermath of a murder or the nagging suspicion that Oliver was being framed.

"Did you get anything useful?" Riker's expression was unreadable.

I tried to sound more confident than I felt. "There's something off about this whole scene. It doesn't seem like Oliver's handiwork."

"Agreed," he mused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "We'll have to dig deeper and see what we can find. But for now, let's get out of here." He guided me toward the door. "We don't want to overstay our welcome."

"Definitely not." I was glad for the excuse to leave. As we stepped out into the fresh air, I took a deep breath, trying to banish the smell of blood and death from my nostrils.

"You okay?" Riker asked.

"Fine," I lied, plastering a smile on my face. "Just another day in the life of a supernatural bounty hunter, right?"



“Right.” He smiled, though I could tell he didn’t quite believe me.

“It’s important for me to stay on the case. We’ll figure it out,” I said, “and if Oliver is guilty, we’ll make sure he gets the justice he deserves. But if he’s not...” My voice trailed off.

“Then we’ll exonerate him,” Riker said, one hand resting on my shoulder for a brief moment. “So let’s start putting the pieces together.”

## CHAPTER 10



“Did you find anything?” Helen asked, approaching us as we moved toward the parking lot.

“Come with me.” I tugged at her arm, gesturing for Riker and Elijah to follow us.

Standing next to my car, I took a deep breath. “I overheard a couple of cops talking inside. The victim wasn’t killed by a vampire bite.”

Elijah raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. “Go on.”

“Blunt-force trauma to the head,” I said. “That’s what they said. Definitely not a vampire-style killing, right?”

Helen pursed her bright red lips, twirling her bullwhip absentmindedly. “That does make things more interesting, darling.”

“Interesting? It changes everything!” The thought of Oliver being framed drummed at the back of my mind.

“It’s definitely a game-changer,” Elijah said. “But how do we prove it?”

“Good question,” Helen said.

The wind picked up, sending my hair into a wild dance around my face. Elijah frowned beside me, deep in thought. “You know,” he began hesitantly, “the killer might have used that magical statue to murder the victim.”

“Magical statue?” Riker asked, his dark eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Helen interjected, her perfectly manicured finger wagging in the air. “That doesn’t clear Oliver of being the killer. He was the last one seen with that statue, remember?”

“*Statue?*” Riker repeated, frustration creeping into his voice. His gaze flickered between Elijah, Helen, and me, searching for answers.

“Oliver was seen fleeing the California murder scene with a statue,” I said absently. “We think it might be the real reason behind all this paranormal chaos.”

“Exactly,” Helen added, flipping her hair back dramatically. “So, even if our victim here wasn’t killed by a vampire bite, Oliver still could’ve done the dirty work with that statue.”

Elijah nodded vigorously. “And we can’t discount the possibility that the statue itself has some sort of supernatural power or significance.”

“Interesting theory,” Riker mused, rubbing the stubble on his chin thoughtfully. “But we need more information. What do we know about this statue? And how can we use that knowledge to prove or disprove Oliver’s involvement in these murders?”

“Let’s split up,” I suggested. “Helen, you and Elijah dig deeper into the statue’s history. Riker and I will continue investigating the crime scene and search for any new leads.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Helen said with a sly smile.

“Be careful,” Elijah warned softly.

“Same goes for you two,” I said, giving him a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Now let’s get to work.” I tossed my car keys to Helen, who caught them with a flourish.

“Of course, darling,” Helen said with a theatrical roll of her eyes, though I could see the worry hidden beneath her glamorous facade.

“Keep an eye on her,” I whispered to Elijah as he climbed into the passenger seat of my car. He gave me a thumbs-up and a reassuring smile, though his eyes betrayed his anxiety.

As they drove away, Riker pulled out his phone and dialed a number. “Hey, it’s Riker,” he said. “Any updates on Oliver?” He paused, listening intently to the report from the other end of the line. “No sign of him leaving the motel room? And no one else went in?” Riker’s brows furrowed in concentration. “Okay, thanks.”

He hung up and turned to face me, his dark eyes serious. “I think it’s time I talk to Oliver,” he announced, his tone brooking no arguments.

“Count me in,” I said. Confronting my vampire ex-husband would be terrifying, but I couldn’t let Riker go alone.

“Absolutely not,” Riker snapped, his protective instincts kicking in. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Try and stop me.” I crossed my arms over my chest and fixed him with a defiant glare. “I’ll just follow you if you try to go without me.”

Riker sighed. “Fine,” he conceded, his expression softening slightly. “But stay close and don’t do anything reckless.”

“Me? Reckless? Never.” I grinned, feeling a surge of adrenaline course through me.

Riker closed his eyes as and turned his head upward, as if praying for strength. “Let’s go,” he finally said, leading me to his truck.

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AS RIKER AND I MADE OUR WAY TO OLIVER’S MOTEL, THE tension in the truck grew thicker by the moment.

Finally, Riker spoke. “Care to elaborate on this idea you have about Oliver being framed?” Riker asked, his tone laced with skepticism. “After all, you’re the one who said he was seen fleeing the first crime scene holding what could be the murder weapon in the second murder.”

I sighed, trying to gather my thoughts into a coherent argument. “I know how it sounds, but everything about the

statue is conjecture at this point. We don't even know what the damn thing is. And honestly? I just can't see Oliver as a killer."

"Really?" Riker glanced at me, his expression a blend of curiosity and disbelief. "You're defending him?"

"*Defending* might be too strong a word." I stared out the window at the rapidly passing cityscape. "There's just something off about all of this, and I can't shake the feeling that we're missing a crucial piece of the puzzle."

Riker mulled over my words, his jaw clenching as he considered their implications. "Let's say, for argument's sake, that you're right and Oliver is being framed. Who would have the motive to do it, and why?"

"Beats me," I shrugged, my eyes flicking back to Riker's face. "But isn't it our job to find out?"

He let out a slow breath, his grip on the steering wheel tightening ever so slightly. "We'll talk to Oliver and see what he has to say. But remember—all vampires are killers. It's in their nature."

I bit my lip, struggling to keep my frustration in check. "Not all of them," I insisted. "Oliver may be a vampire, but I know him—he wouldn't kill without reason."

Riker shot me a sidelong glance, his dark eyes somber and searching. "You need to be careful with that kind of thinking, Tessa. It can blind you to the truth."

"Or it can lead us to it," I countered, unwilling to give up on Oliver just yet.

We parked away from the motel parking lot. In the daylight, I got a better look at it. The place had seen better days, its facade a patchwork of peeling paint and cracked plaster, worn down by time and indifference. As Riker parked his pickup, I took a deep breath.

"Ready?" Riker asked, unbuckling his seatbelt and turning to face me. His expression was unreadable.

“Born ready.” I gave a half-smirk, trying to inject some levity into the situation. But beneath the humor, my heart hammered a nervous rhythm against my ribs.

Riker reached across me, opening the glovebox and pulling out a couple of wooden stakes. “Take this,” he said, handing me one.

My chest tightened, like an invisible fist clenched around it, but I took the stake and tucked it into the waistband of my jeans.

“Let’s go,” he said, opening the door and stepping out. I followed suit, my boots tapping on the asphalt as we approached the team Niko had put in place to watch Oliver.

## CHAPTER 11



**R**iker stood tall and commanding before Niko's men, his intimidating presence a force to be reckoned with. His voice was firm as he issued his orders.

“Keep your weapons trained on Oliver's door. No one goes in or out without my say-so.”

The leader of the team nodded in agreement, then added, “We can send a vampire-killer up with you and Tessa, just in case.”

Riker shook his head, holding up the wooden stake he carried. “I've got it covered,” he said confidently.

I glanced down at the stake, then back up at Riker, a little uneasy about what we were about to do.

Actually confronting my ex-husband was not exactly something I'd planned on doing when I woke up this morning.

“Okay,” Riker turned to me. “You should be the one to knock on the door. Oliver might be more likely to answer if he hears it's you.”

“Great,” I muttered under my breath, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. Just what I needed—facing an estranged vampire ex-husband who's wanted for murder. “But what if he doesn't recognize me? It's been a while, and”—I motioned vaguely at my purple curls—“you know, new hair.”

“Trust me,” Riker said, giving me a reassuring smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. “He'll recognize you.”

I sighed, knowing there wasn't any point in arguing. If it came down to it, I was sure Riker would have my back.

Plus, I was getting better at this supernatural bounty hunting thing...

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

"Fine," I conceded, trying to sound confident. "Let's do this."

As we headed up to Oliver's room, though, one thought kept nagging at me—how did my life turn into a supernatural soap opera?

"Okay," I muttered, trying to swallow the lump of anxiety that had taken up residence in my throat. "I'll knock. But don't expect me to turn on the charm or anything. Last time we spoke, I was filing for divorce."

Riker raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything, which was probably for the best. The last thing I needed right now was a pep talk from Mr. Paranormal Bounty Hunter Extraordinaire.

We ascended the outdoor stairs of the rundown motel, our footsteps echoing. I shuddered at the thought of what awaited us behind Oliver's door. A vampire who might still hold a grudge against me—or worse, who might want to rekindle whatever it was we'd had during that wild week in Vegas.

"Keep your guard up," Riker murmured as we reached the top of the stairs. I gave him a nod, my fingers curling around the stake I'd tucked into the waistband of my jeans. I might not be as skilled as Riker when it came to hunting supernatural creatures, but I wasn't entirely defenseless.

The concrete walkway leading to Oliver's room felt like the longest, most nerve-wracking red carpet in history, and I had to resist the urge to sprint back down the stairs and pretend none of this was happening.

Instead, I focused on putting one foot in front of the other, trying to ignore the racing pulse that threatened to deafen me.

Finally, we reached the door, its peeling paint and slightly crooked number serving as a stark reminder of how far my life had strayed from normalcy. I took a deep breath, attempting to steady myself.



Riker placed a steadying hand at the small of my back. I knew he cared about me, in his own stoic way, and it gave me some measure of comfort.

I pasted a smile on my face and raised my hand. I knocked on the door, my knuckles creating a hollow echo that reverberated through me. Silence greeted us. I glanced at Riker, whose steely gaze remained fixed on the door. I knocked again, louder this time.

“Maybe he’s not in there,” I ventured, hope and doubt warring within me.

“Stand back,” Riker warned. “Bond enforcement!” With a swift kick from Riker’s steel-toed boot, the door splintered open, revealing the dimly lit room beyond.

“Nice kick,” I muttered, awestruck. I admired Riker’s ease at breaking down doors—it was a skill I wished I had in my arsenal.

“Thanks,” he replied tersely, slipping into the room with practiced stealth. I followed close behind him.

The motel room was nondescript, with its beige walls and worn carpet. On the dresser, illuminated by the flickering light of the television, stood a pale metal statue of a sinuous woman with elongated limbs. Her features were marred by the blood that coated her head, dripping down her face like gruesome tears.

“Jesus,” I whispered, fighting the urge to gag. Riker’s expression tightened, his jaw clenched as he surveyed the room.

The room felt like a chaotic scene from a horror film, with the bloody statue standing ominously on the dresser as though it were a silent witness to the violence that had unfolded.

We stood there, surrounded by the eerie stillness of the room, and fear twisted through me.

Riker pointed at the statue. “I think it’s obvious Oliver killed the second victim—and probably the first one, too.”

“I never thought he could do something like this,” I muttered, my mind reeling as I tried to reconcile the man I once knew with the murderer he’d become.

“Vampires are predators,” Riker reminded me. “No matter how well you think you know them, they’re always capable of turning on you.”

“Thanks for the pep talk,” I grumbled sarcastically, though I couldn’t deny the truth in his words.

“Look, we need to focus on finding him before he hurts anyone else,” Riker urged, his tone serious. “We’ll figure out the why later.”

He was right, of course. We couldn’t waste time dwelling on what might have driven Oliver to kill.

“Oliver was here recently,” Riker murmured, checking every corner of the room for any sign of my ex-husband-turned-vampire.

“Do you think he’s still nearby?” I asked, trembling slightly. The thought of Oliver lurking in the shadows, waiting to strike, sent a shudder through my entire body.

“Hard to say.” Riker’s tone was grim.

I paused. “Where could he have gone?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he snapped, his frustration evident. “But you can bet I’ll be having a talk with Niko’s men. They should’ve been watching the exit.”

“Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath to steady my nerves. “Then what?”

“We’ll start by searching the surrounding area, see if anyone spotted a vampire on the move,” Riker said, already formulating a plan.

“Great, now we’re hunting vampires in broad daylight. What could go wrong?” I said, trying to inject some humor into the dire situation.

“Maybe you’ll develop a taste for it.” Riker smirked.

“So, let’s find Oliver before I have to add ‘failed vampire hunt’ to my résumé.”

“I’m calling the police first,” Riker announced, his tone stern as he pulled out his phone. “They need to know he really is in town.”

With that, he stepped outside, leaving me alone in the motel room with the creepy statue.

## CHAPTER 12



**A**s Riker stepped outside to make his call, my own phone began to buzz in my pocket.

“Hello?” I said, answering an unfamiliar number. The room seemed to grow colder, and given Riker’s absence, I suddenly felt very exposed.

“Don’t hang up, Tessa. I need your help.”

My breath caught in my throat. It was Oliver. His voice stirred up a whirlwind of conflicting emotions—fear, a touch of anger, and an undeniable curiosity.

“Oliver?” I managed to choke out, gripping the phone tighter. My heart pounded, and for a brief moment, I considered hanging up, but the plea in his tone held me captive. “Where the hell are you?”

“Can’t tell you that,” he said cryptically. “But I need to talk to you.”

I wanted to say no. Every fiber of my being screamed for me to hang up the phone and leave him to deal with the mess he’d created. But the thought of abandoning him when he had half the city’s law enforcement officials after him twisted my insides into tangled knots.

“Please,” he said, urgency lacing his words. “I didn’t kill those people. You have to believe me.”

“Believe you?” I scoffed, the anger bubbling up inside me. “You’re a wanted murderer and a vampire, Oliver! Why should I trust anything you say?”

“Because you know me,” he insisted. “We may not have been married long, but did I ever give you a reason to doubt my character?”

I hesitated, memories of our short-lived marriage filling my mind. He had been reckless, impulsive even, but never malicious. Never a killer.

I sighed, trying to untangle all the thoughts in my head.

“Fine,” I said reluctantly. “We can meet late tonight. My office, two in the morning.” My heart raced with anticipation and dread. “But if this is a trap, Oliver, I swear I’ll stake you myself.”

He laughed quietly, and then the line went dead in my ear. I was left standing there, feeling like I’d just made a deal with the devil himself.

The call left me feeling shaken, my thoughts a chaotic mess. Trusting Oliver was a huge risk, one that could very well cost me my life. But something in his voice had been genuine—the desperate plea of someone who truly needed help.

This was madness—meeting with my vampire ex-husband who was wanted for murder. But something deep within me refused to turn my back on him, even if it meant walking straight into danger.

“Who was that?” Riker asked, re-entering the room with a frown.

“Jesus, Riker,” I hissed, clutching at my chest as if that would calm my racing heart. “A little warning next time?”

He smirked and gave me a mock salute before gesturing toward the door. “Police are on their way. Let’s wait outside.”

“Great,” I muttered, following him out of the motel room. Riker leaned against his giant pickup truck, arms crossed over his broad chest, while I perched on the edge of the passenger seat, door open.

“So who called you while I was on the phone with the cops?” Riker asked again. Jeez, he was persistent.

My mind raced as I stared at the now-silent phone. “Wrong number,” I said.

He gave me a searching glance but didn’t ask anything more.

Red and blue lights flashed in the distance, signaling the arrival of the police. As they pulled up, Riker walked over to greet them, leaving me alone with my thoughts, replaying the conversation with Oliver and wondering what the hell I’d gotten myself into.

When the officers finally approached me, I recounted the events that had led us to find the statue. They listened intently, scribbling notes and asking questions here and there. It felt like an eternity, but eventually, they seemed satisfied with my story.

“Your account matches Mr. Kane’s,” one officer said, glancing between me and Riker. “You’re free to go, Ms. Fury. But don’t hesitate to contact us if you remember anything else.”

I tried not to let my relief show. The last thing I needed was a night in jail on top of everything else.

As the police cars pulled away, I let out a shaky breath. Riker came to stand beside me, his presence both reassuring and intimidating.

“Ready to get out of here?” he asked.

“More than ready.” I slid into the passenger seat. “Let’s put some distance between us and this mess.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Riker said, starting up the engine. I cast one last glance at the motel as we drove away, wondering just how deep this rabbit hole went—and praying I’d come out the other side in one piece.

Riker’s truck rumbled to a halt outside my office. The hum of city life seemed muted from inside the cab, and the silence between us sagged with unspoken words.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said, unbuckling my seatbelt and letting my hand linger on the door handle. A part of me hoped that Riker would lean over, maybe even go for another kiss—

or even just some sort of reassurance. Instead, he merely nodded, his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

“Stay safe,” he said gruffly, managing to avoid cursing at me for once. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

“Will do.” I smiled before slipping out of the truck. My heels clacked against the pavement, echoing as the truck pulled away, leaving me standing alone outside my office.

I took a deep breath, trying to shake off my disappointment, and turned to face the building. Time to get down to business.

Inside, Helen and Elijah huddled together over a laptop. As soon as they noticed me, Helen’s voice cut through the quiet like her whip.

“Darling, you need to see this,” she called, her painted lips curving into a practiced smile. The allure of new information tugged at my curiosity, pulling me toward them.

“Show me,” I said.

Elijah tapped a few keys, enlarging an image on the screen. “We’ve been digging into that statue,” he said. “Turns out it really is more than just a creepy knickknack.”

“Way more,” Helen interjected, her excitement barely contained. “This thing has a history, Tessa. A dark and twisted one.”

“Okay...” I said slowly, my mind spinning with possibilities. “So what does that mean for us?”

Elijah exchanged a glance with Helen before answering. “It means we might be in over our heads—and we’ve only just begun to scratch the surface.”

I circled around the desk, my purple curls bouncing with each step, and peered at the computer screen. The image that greeted me was all too familiar—the same small statue that Riker and I had just handed over to the police. I swallowed hard.

“Tell me everything,” I said.

“The statue is called ‘The Blood Sentinel.’ It’s ancient, no one knows how old,” Helen said.

“Sounds like a bedtime story,” I said, trying to lighten the mood. But deep down, I felt the revelation squeezing me like a vise.

“Far from it, dear.” Helen’s voice took on a somber tone. “Legend has it that this statue possesses immense power, but there’s a catch.”

“Isn’t there always?” I sighed, rubbing my temples as if that might somehow ease the burden of knowledge.

“Indeed. The Blood Sentinel must be fed blood on a regular basis. If it doesn’t receive its sustenance, the statue’s power weakens, and whoever possesses it suffers the consequences.”

“Consequences?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“Rumors vary, but they all point to one thing—death,” Elijah said, his usually laid-back demeanor replaced by grim resolve.

“Blood, huh? Just like vampires,” I murmured, the realization hitting me that my ex-husband and the statue had a chilling similarity. I stared at the image on the computer screen.

“Seems so,” Helen said, her usual glamour momentarily overshadowed by the grim expression she wore.

“Great. So not only is my ex-husband possibly a murderer, he’s also playing with unstoppable magical forces that could kill him if he’s not careful.” I let out a humorless laugh, then shook my head. “What a mess.”

“Look on the bright side,” Helen suggested. “At least we know what we’re dealing with now. Knowledge is power, after all.”

“True,” I conceded, allowing myself a small smile. “And we’re going to need all the power we can get if we want to bring Oliver to justice.”

“Damn straight,” Elijah said.

“You two keep up the good work,” I said. “Research everything you can about the Blood Sentinel and how we might be able to use it to our advantage.”



“Got it,” Elijah nodded, his focus returning to the screen as he typed away at the keyboard.

“Tomorrow.” I glanced at my watch. “You two should go home for the day.”

On my own drive home, I tried to process everything I’d learned. For once, it wasn’t a supernatural monster I was after. It was my own past, catching up with me in the most twisted way possible.

My apartment building came into view, its familiar brick exterior offering a small comfort in the midst of the storm.

I found myself checking the grounds more carefully than usual as I exited my car.

*Get some rest*, I told myself. I’d need it for my two a.m. meeting with Oliver.

Inside, I kicked off my shoes and peeled off my jacket. My apartment was small but cozy, and the sight of my familiar surroundings should have brought me comfort.

Instead, it only made me feel more restless.

I cooked dinner and tried to watch television, but nothing held my attention.

By bedtime, I was wound tighter than ever.

“Sleep, Tessa. Just sleep,” I muttered as I changed into my most comfortable pajamas. I glanced at the clock on my nightstand—not even half past ten. With a resigned sigh, I crawled under the covers and flicked off the bedside lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

But sleep refused to come.

“Damn you, Oliver,” I whispered into the darkness, hating how his presence still managed to haunt me even when he wasn’t around. I couldn’t stop thinking about our upcoming meeting, and what it might mean for both of us. Would we be able to find a solution, or would I end up turning him in? My thoughts raced, leaving me tossing and turning in my bed.

“Vampires and statues that need blood... What’s next?” I mumbled, frustrated with the chaos that seemed to follow me everywhere these days. Even the shadows in the room seemed to mock me, shifting and stretching across the walls as if they were alive.

“I give up,” I sighed, sitting up and rubbing my eyes. If sleep wouldn’t come, then maybe a warm cup of tea would help.

I padded softly to the kitchen, careful not to disturb any sleeping neighbors. Flicking on the stove, I filled the kettle with water and set it on the burner. While I waited for it to boil, I leaned against the counter, staring blankly at the fridge covered in magnets.

Including one from Vegas.

I groaned, and the kettle whistled, jolting me out of my musings. I poured steaming water over a chamomile tea bag and took a tentative sip, hoping it would help calm my nerves.

I cradled the warm mug in my hands, giving myself a pep-talk aloud. “You’ve faced werewolves, witches, and all sorts of monsters. You can handle one meeting with your vampire ex-husband.”

I returned to bed, setting my alarm and willing myself to sleep. But despite my best efforts, every time I closed my eyes, images of Oliver danced behind my eyelids, taunting me as the hours ticked by.

“Damn you, Oliver,” I muttered again, cursing him and my insomnia. “I’ll deal with you at two a.m., even if it kills me.”

I tried to ignore the knowledge that if I was wrong, it really might kill me.

Or, to be precise, my ex might.

## CHAPTER 13



The moonlit streets of Dallas were eerily quiet as I headed toward my office.

I had one hour to prepare before Oliver would knock on the door.

This whole interlude had really driven home the fact that I should've known better than to marry a random guy I met in Vegas.

But life's full of poor choices.

At least, mine is.

I mean, poor choices had led me to my current career, after all.

As I unlocked the office door, the darkness inside was overwhelming, but I refused to let it intimidate me. I was a supernatural bounty hunter, for crying out loud.

Once inside, my hands trembled as I flipped on the lights and gave the room a once-over for any signs of intrusion.

All clear.

Now it was time to arm myself. I wasn't sure how effective my so-called vampire-killing weapons would be, considering my track record as a bounty hunter, but it was better than facing Oliver empty-handed.

I had the stake Riker had given me, but I wanted to stash several more around the office in easy reach.

I rummaged through the chest buried beneath stacks of unopened mail, pulling out the first stake I found. It was

crudely carved from oak, its tip sharp enough to pierce flesh.

My grip tightened around it as I imagined driving it into Oliver's unbeating heart.

Would he crumble into dust like in the movies? Or just laugh in my face?

I hoped I wouldn't have to find out. I slid the stake into its holster, then strapped that to my thigh.

Then I pulled out all the stakes we had, putting several in my pockets and concealing the rest in easy-to-reach places.

Next, I fumbled with a small vial of holy water—the same one I'd been carrying all day—rolling it between my fingers. Father Santiago had blessed the water himself, though I wasn't sure if it held any real power.

But hey, it couldn't hurt to have every possible weapon on hand.

"If you attack me, you're in for a surprise," I whispered to an imaginary Oliver, tucking the vial into a pocket next to a stake.

I glanced around the room, realizing I still needed a crucifix. My eyes landed on the one hanging above the door. It was a simple wooden piece, but it would have to do.

"Sorry, Mami," I apologized to my mother in my mind as I reached up and carefully removed the cross from its place.

The weight of it in my hand felt like a promise to protect myself, and I thought of my mom, her worried eyes and the way she switched between Spanish and English when lecturing me about safety.

She'd never understand why I hunted supernatural monsters for a living, but I hoped she knew I did it out of some twisted sense of duty.

I slipped the cross into the front pocket of my jeans.

My pockets bulging with every vampire-killing device in my arsenal, I took a deep breath and stared at the clock. It was almost time.

Maybe in facing Oliver, I could prove to myself that I was more than just a mediocre bounty hunter with an anchor tattoo and a weakness for Vegas weddings. No more running, no more hiding. It was time to face my past and take control of my future.

At exactly 2 a.m., the sound of knocking echoed through the office.

*Here goes nothing.*

I approached the door, clutching a stake in one hand and a vial of holy water in the other. I unlocked the door and stepped back. The door swung open to reveal Oliver, his pale skin almost luminous in the moonlight. He smirked, showing off those dangerously sharp fangs through the same smile that had once made me swoon like a giddy teenager.

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?” he asked.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You always were crap at hiding your intentions.”

He chuckled and held up his hands in mock surrender. “You got me. But just so you know, I don’t *need* to be invited in. This is a business open to the public, after all. I just thought you might want to be polite.”

Right. Why should the laws of vampire lore apply to my ex-husband?

“Fine, come in,” I muttered begrudgingly. As Oliver stepped into the office, I took a moment to size him up. Despite being a blood-sucking creature of the night, he still managed to be infuriatingly attractive.

It was almost enough to make me forget he was wanted for murder. Almost.

“Nice place you’ve got here,” Oliver commented casually, glancing around the office as if he hadn’t just dropped back into my life like an unwanted surprise party.

“Save the small talk,” I snapped, my grip on the stake tightening. “You’re not here to discuss interior decorating.”

“Ah, yes,” he said, feigning nonchalance. “I suppose we should get down to business.”

“Fine by me.” I was having to work hard to maintain my composure as my heart raced with adrenaline. It was do or die time, and I wasn’t planning on dying tonight.

Steeling myself, I led Oliver through the dimly lit hallway toward the conference room. The office was eerily quiet, making the sound of our footsteps echo ominously. Despite my bravado, being alone with him sent chills down my spine.

“Thirsty?” I asked, holding out a bottle of water with a forced smile plastered on my face. “I mean, I know it’s not your preferred drink, but it’s all we’ve got.”

“Pass,” he said coolly, eyeing the bottle with an amused expression. No surprise there; even if he were human, I doubted he’d accept anything from me without suspicion.

I gestured for him to take a seat at the long mahogany table, every muscle in my body tensed and ready for action. He slid into a chair, his dark eyes never leaving mine, as if daring me to make a move. Choosing a seat by the door, I tried to appear casual while ensuring a quick escape route if needed.

“You probably already know this,” I began, taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, “but I’m supposed to bring you in for jumping bail on a murder charge.”

“Of course,” he said, leaning back in his chair, his gaze unwavering. “But you have to believe me, Tessa. I didn’t do it.”

His plea caught me off guard. I searched his face for any hint of deceit but found only sincerity in those dark depths.

Could it be true? Was my vampire ex-husband actually innocent?

“If you’re telling the truth,” I said slowly, weighing each word carefully, “then why did you jump bail? Why not stay and fight the charges?”

“Because I knew they wouldn’t believe me,” he said. “I’m a vampire. They think we’re all monsters.”

“Can’t say I blame them,” I muttered under my breath before realizing how it sounded out loud. I quickly added, “But that doesn’t mean I won’t hear you out. I need to know the whole story.”

I studied Oliver’s face for a moment, the flickering fluorescent lights casting eerie shadows over his pale features. As much as I didn’t want to get involved with my vampire ex-husband’s problems, I couldn’t ignore the possibility of a connection to the other murder.

“And do you know anything about a recent murder here in Dallas?”

He arched an eyebrow and shook his head, genuine shock painting his face. “No. What does that have to do with me?”

“Apparently, it has the same MO as the one in California. You’re aware that doesn’t look good for you, right?” I watched his reaction closely.

“Jesus, Tessa. I swear, I had nothing to do with either of them.”

“Okay,” I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose. This was getting more complicated by the minute. “Tell me your side of the story.”

“I’ll tell you everything, but you have to promise to listen with an open mind.”

“Fine,” I agreed, crossing my arms and leaning back in my chair.

Oliver’s eyes took on a faraway look. “It all started right after our divorce.”

Was he about to make this my fault?

God, I hoped he was about to tell me the truth.

And if he was lying, well... then I supposed I’d have to stake my ex-husband after all.

## CHAPTER 14



I watched as Oliver's eyes seemed to darken. He let out a deep breath. "After our divorce, I was lost. I tried to find a way to numb the pain, and that's when I fell in with a bad crowd."

*Bad* felt like an understatement when it came to vampires, but I kept quiet, my curiosity piqued. I picked at the frayed edge of my jeans, hoping for some sense of control as I braced myself for the rest of his tale.

"Drugs became my escape," Oliver admitted, shame lining his handsome face. "It started out small, but pretty soon, I found myself in too deep. The drugs were expensive, and I couldn't afford them anymore. That's when I got involved with the vampires."

My heart raced, though I wasn't sure if it was from anger or fear.

"Look, I know how it sounds." Oliver ran a hand through his hair. "But I didn't have anything else. I was desperate, and they offered me a solution: I could give them my blood in exchange for drugs."

I shuddered. The thought of those cold, lifeless creatures sinking their teeth into Oliver's flesh nauseated me. I wasn't surprised that he hadn't made the best decisions since our divorce, but I could hardly believe what he was telling me. "Your blood? That's insane. Do you have any idea what kind of danger you put yourself in?"



“Trust me, I know. It was stupid, reckless. But I was so far gone. I didn’t care what happened to me.” Oliver’s gaze bore into mine, the vulnerability in his eyes sending a pang of guilt through my chest.

I pushed it away, focusing on the story, not the incipient guilt-trip. “Obviously, it led to you being turned into a vampire,” I muttered, trying to shake off the feelings that threatened to overwhelm me. “But why? What made them decide to do that?”

“Elizabeth happened,” he said, and I could tell there was more to that story than he let on.

“Elizabeth, huh?” I couldn’t help the hint of jealousy that crept into my words. “And who is she?”

“Was,” Oliver corrected, his eyes darkening. “She was a vampire who took an interest in me. At first, it was just the blood—she said mine had a unique flavor that she found irresistible.”

“Great. My ex-husband’s blood is vampire catnip,” I muttered, rolling my eyes.

“Anyway,” he continued, ignoring my comment, “she started taking more and more of my blood, forming some sort of bond with me. I can’t explain it, but being with her...it was intoxicating, and not just because of the drugs. The whole experience of giving blood was...almost sexual.”

“Okay, stop right there.” I held up a hand, cutting him off. “I don’t need to hear about your kinky vampire encounters, thank you very much.”

“Sorry,” Oliver mumbled, looking genuinely apologetic. “I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. It’s just...part of the story.”

“Fine, fine. Just...skip over the gory details, okay?” I scowled at him, trying to shake off the image of him entwined with some vampy seductress.

“Okay.” He nodded, clearly relieved to move past that part of the tale. “So, Elizabeth and I developed this connection—and before you say anything, it wasn’t romantic or anything like

that. It was just...intense. But even then, I never imagined she would turn me into one of them.”

A surge of anger at this Elizabeth woman for turning Oliver into a monster left me dizzy. She had to have known what she was doing, how much pain and confusion it would cause him. But then I realized that getting angry wouldn't help Oliver or me. We needed to focus on finding a way out of this mess.

“Skipping ahead a bit,” Oliver continued, “there was this one night when Elizabeth took too much. She drained me to the point where I was on the brink of death.” He looked down at his hands, seeming almost ashamed. “She panicked and decided the only way to save me was to turn me into a vampire.”

A part of me wished I could reach out and comfort him, but I held back. The man I'd married was gone, replaced by this... creature.

“Being a new vampire was like nothing I'd ever experienced before,” he continued, his eyes distant as if reliving those early days. “I was constantly hungry—starving, really. And it wasn't just about food. I could smell blood on everyone, all the time. It made me feel like a wild animal, desperate for a taste.”

“That sounds...horrifying,” I said softly, trying to imagine what it must have been like for him. Suddenly, Oliver's past seemed so much darker and more complicated than anything I'd known.

“Elizabeth kept me under control, though. She taught me how to feed without killing, how to take just enough to satisfy my hunger without ending another person's life.” His gaze met mine. “In her own twisted way, she saved me.”

“Wait,” I interrupted, shaking my head. “Let me get this straight: Elizabeth almost killed you, then turned you into the very thing that brought you to the brink of death. And, on top of that, she taught you how not to kill when feeding?” My eyebrows rose in disbelief.

Oliver sighed and nodded, running a hand through his messy hair. “Yeah, it's pretty ironic when you put it like that,” he said

with a bitter chuckle. “But she did help me keep my humanity intact, Tessa. She made sure I didn’t become a mindless killer, even after what she’d done to me.”

Oliver had made his own choices, sure, but Elizabeth had held the reins, guiding him down a dark road that led to him becoming a monster.

Or had he always been a monster, and I just never saw it?

I pursed my lips, mulling over his words. Though it was difficult to see any silver linings in this situation, I had to admit that it sounded as if there was some truth to what he said. Still, I couldn’t shake off the feeling that there was more to this story.

I gestured for him to continue. “So what happened next?”

Oliver took a deep breath before picking up the story again. “Well, one night, I came home to the apartment we shared in a building owned by vampires.” His voice trembled slightly, hinting at the emotional weight of what he was about to reveal. “When I opened the door, there she was—Elizabeth, dead on the floor, a stake through her heart.”

I felt a pang of sympathy for him. It must have been a horrific sight for him to witness, especially considering their complicated relationship.

“Who do you think killed her?” I asked cautiously.

Oliver shook his head, his eyes clouded with uncertainty. “I don’t know. But I intend to find out—and make them pay for what they’ve done.”

“Go on,” I urged. “What happened after you found her?”

Oliver took a shaky breath before continuing. “I rushed to Elizabeth, but she was already long gone. As I stood up, still reeling from the shock, someone burst out of a back room and rushed past me, clutching something tightly in his hand.”

“Did you see what it was?” I asked, my fingers unconsciously clenching into fists as I imagined the scene.

“No, I didn’t get a good look at it,” he said. “But I knew it had to be important—or at least connected to Elizabeth’s murder.

So, I didn't think twice; I just tackled the intruder to the ground." A hint of pride flickered in his eyes. "I managed to wrest the object from his grasp, but he slipped out of my hold and ran. I chased after him, but..."

"Let me guess," I interrupted, my tone growing serious. "You were the only one the police saw, so they arrested you instead."

"Exactly," Oliver confirmed. "I tried to explain that I was trying to catch the real killer, but they wouldn't listen. They just assumed I was the murderer since I was the only one there."

"Okay, then," I announced, forcing a smile onto my lips. "Tell me what happened after the police arrested you?"

"I don't know who called them, but it wasn't long before the vampire association who owned the building posted my bail. They didn't want one of their own lingering in police custody, attracting attention.

"Anyway, once I was out, I started searching for answers. That's when I learned you had become a supernatural bounty hunter and were living in Dallas," he continued. "I knew I had to find you. I hoped that you might be able to help me."

The shock of hearing that Oliver had come to Dallas specifically to find me left me momentarily speechless. I shook my head, still trying to make sense of it all. "Why did you think I would help you?" I asked, crossing my arms over the anchor tattoo on my chest. "After everything that happened between us?"

"Because you're the only person who ever truly loved me." Oliver's voice echoed with raw emotion. "And I'm hoping that love—whatever might be left of it—is enough to make you want to save me one last time."

A tidal wave of emotions crashed over me, leaving me breathless and unsure how to respond.

As much as I wanted to hold onto the anger and resentment I felt toward Oliver, I couldn't deny the truth in his words. We had loved each other, once upon a time.

Oliver had been through hell, but it seemed he'd managed to hold onto his humanity—at least, to some extent. And as much as I hated to admit it, there was still a part of me that cared about him, that wanted to help him.

But could I really trust him? Could I risk everything—my life, my career, my heart—on the slim chance that the man I'd once loved was still in there, somewhere beneath the monster?

“Oliver,” I said slowly, choosing my words carefully, “I want to help you. But I need to know that I can trust you. That you won't turn on me or anyone else.”

“I swear to you: I'm not the same person I was back then. I've changed—and not just because of the vampire thing.”

I stared into his eyes, searching for any sign of deception, but all I saw was sincerity and desperation. And, despite my better judgment, I knew I couldn't turn him away.

“Okay,” I breathed. “I'll help you, Oliver. But don't think this means we're getting back together or anything.”

“Of course not,” he said, his relief evident. “I knew I could count on you.”

“Let's just focus on finding the real murderer and clearing your name,” I said.

After all, as a supernatural bounty hunter, wasn't that what I signed up for? Hunting monsters and righting wrongs?

I'd definitely learned that hunting monsters was never easy.

And I feared that would be doubly true this time since the monster I was dealing was the ghost of my own past.

## CHAPTER 15



“How did you end up with the statue?” I asked Oliver.

He shrugged. “It showed up in my motel room the first night I was here. I recognized it as the same one that had been at Elizabeth’s crime scene.”

I shook my head, finally realizing something. “That’s not the murder you’re listed as having jumped bail on.”

He blinked. “It’s not?”

“No.” Something here was really not adding up. “But I’ll look into that tomorrow.” I’d agreed to help him, but that didn’t mean I wanted him hanging around while I researched the case. I paused before speaking again. “The police raided your motel room and got the statue,” I said.

He smirked, his fangs glinting. “I know.”

My heart skipped a beat. “How did you get out of there without anyone seeing you?” I asked, curiosity getting the better of me.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” He winked but refused to tell me anything more. I rolled my eyes; he always had a flair for being mysterious and annoyingly cryptic.

“Listen,” I sighed. “You need to find a place to hide out. I can’t protect you.” The thought of protecting a vampire—especially one who happened to be my ex—made me feel like I was in some sort of twisted fairy tale. But I couldn’t just turn him in, either; not without knowing the truth.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Fine—but you have to stay in touch with me while you try to figure out what’s really going on.”

“I will,” I muttered, wondering how I’d gotten myself into this mess. First, proving a billionaire werewolf’s innocence, and now helping my vampire ex-husband evade the law.

Just another day in the life of Tessa Fury, supernatural bounty hunter extraordinaire.

I snorted at the thought, turning the noise into a cough when Oliver gave me a puzzled look. “Make sure you don’t get caught,” I said. “I don’t want anyone tracking you down.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he said. “I’ll find a place to hide out. But remember our deal—you’re going to help me figure this out.”

“Of course,” I said. The seriousness of the situation was starting to sink in, and I felt responsible for his safety now. I stood up and ushered him out of the room.

As he prepared to leave, Oliver hesitated for a moment in the doorway. “Tessa,” he said softly, leaning in toward me. His cold breath brushed against my cheek as he tried to press a gentle kiss there, but I instinctively flinched back from him.

“Sorry,” I muttered, not meeting his eyes. The hurt expression on his face stung, but I couldn’t quite pinpoint the reason for my reaction. Was it because he was my ex-husband, or because he was a vampire?

*Maybe both.*

“Goodbye,” Oliver whispered, stepping away from me. He moved out the office door, then vanished into the shadows, leaving me standing alone.

As I watched him disappear, I realized it didn’t matter why I had flinched. What mattered was uncovering the truth and keeping Oliver safe. Sighing, I locked up the office and headed back to my apartment, mentally preparing myself for the tasks.

Supernatural bounty hunter extraordinaire, my ass.

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JUST A FEW HOURS LATER, THE MORNING SUN WAS RELENTLESS, bearing down on me like a spotlight as I stumbled into the office with bleary eyes. My tardiness was apparent, even to Elijah, who raised a brow as I poured myself a cup of coffee.

“Rough night?” he asked.

“Something like that,” I mumbled, taking a long sip of the hot liquid and trying not to think about my meeting with Oliver.

Helen sashayed over. “We’ve been discussing the case. Care to join us?”

I clutched my coffee mug like a lifeline as I settled into a chair next to them, trying to ready myself for whatever theories they’d concocted regarding Oliver’s involvement in the murders.

Elijah leaned forward, elbows on the table. “So, we’ve been thinking... if Oliver really did kill those two victims, why didn’t he take their blood? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Helen nodded, twirling her bullwhip absentmindedly. “He’s a vampire, after all. Blood sustenance is kind of their thing, right?”

I bit my lip, unwilling to divulge the details of my late-night meeting with Oliver or his insistence that he wasn’t responsible for the killings. Instead, I took another swig of coffee and focused on the bitterness that coated my tongue.

“Maybe he was interrupted?” I offered weakly, trying to maintain an air of professionalism and hoping they wouldn’t pry too much.

“Or maybe he’s trying to throw us off his trail by making it look like someone else did it,” Helen suggested, her eyes narrowing in thought. “A clever ploy.”

“Could be.” Elijah rubbed his chin. “But we need more evidence before we can make any conclusions. We’re still in the dark about a lot of things.”



In the recesses of my mind, I wondered if Oliver was telling the truth. If he wasn't behind the murders, then who was? And why were they trying to pin it on him?

"Listen, I'm telling you, it's bizarre that he didn't take their blood," Elijah insisted, his voice gaining intensity as he leaned forward on the table.

"Maybe he had a change of heart?" Helen offered, tapping her long, manicured nails against her coffee mug. "Or perhaps he's too good to drink from just anyone now?"

I rolled my eyes at their speculations but chose not to intervene.

"Or maybe—" Helen started but was interrupted by the office door swinging open.

Niko Savas strode in, looking as dashing as ever with his dark hair and icy blue eyes. His presence seemed to fill the room, making it feel smaller somehow. I was blown away by his attractiveness each time I saw him, despite my best efforts to remain composed.

"Morning, everyone," Niko greeted us, casually leaning against the doorway. I felt my cheeks flush as my mind raced with thoughts of our stolen kisses.

"Good morning, Niko," Helen purred, giving him a sultry wink while Elijah nodded in acknowledgment.

"I understand you had an interesting meeting last night," Niko said, directing his gaze at me. I felt a pang of anxiety in my chest, my secret rendezvous with Oliver now laid bare.

Elijah and Helen exchanged surprised and speculative looks. Desperate to steer the conversation away from my late-night encounter, I stood abruptly and gestured for Niko to follow me.

"Conference room. Now," I commanded, trying to maintain authority in my voice.

As we walked into the conference room, I felt my friends' stares on my back. I closed the door behind us and turned to

face Niko, who leaned against the table. I tried to ignore the rapid thumping of my heart as I stood across from Niko.

“Spill it,” I demanded, narrowing my eyes at him. “How did you find out about my meeting with Oliver?”

Niko simply raised one eyebrow and gave me a look that said he knew more than he was letting on. It was clear he wasn't going to divulge how he had learned about my rendezvous. I exhaled, deciding to accept the mystery for now and move forward.

“Fine,” I conceded, trying not to let my frustration show. “I'll talk,” I said, crossing my arms defensively. “But this stays between us.”

Niko held up his hands in mock surrender. “Your secrets are safe with me, Tessa.”

I sighed, feeling a hard ball of tension release in my chest. With Niko's help, maybe I could get to the bottom of this mystery and save Oliver from the danger that lurked in the shadows.

“Oliver claims he didn't kill either of the murder victims. He's desperate to clear his name, and I believe him.”

“Interesting,” Niko mused, his piercing blue eyes studying me intensely. “And what do you know about the statue that the police seized from his motel room?”

I hesitated for a moment, recalling the strange relic. Its origin and purpose remained enigmatic, but I sensed it held significance beyond my understanding.

“Truthfully, I don't know much,” I said. “But I can tell it's important, maybe even dangerous.”

“Which is why I need your help,” Niko said, leaning in closer. His nearness made my pulse quicken, but I fought to keep my composure. “Will you help me get the statue away from the police?”

My thoughts raced, weighing the potential consequences of such an action. Was it worth the risk? Could I really trust

Niko? Despite my lingering doubts, I knew deep down that if we wanted to uncover the truth, this might be our only chance.

After a moment's hesitation, I looked Niko in the eye and said, "I can't actively help you steal the statue. But I won't try to stop you, either."

"Fair enough," he said, his blue eyes intense. "I'll share any information I get."

With that, I turned and opened the conference room door, only to find Elijah and Helen tumbling away from it. They had been listening in on our conversation, their expressions a mix of guilt and amusement.

"Seriously, you two?" I rolled my eyes at their antics.

"Sorry," Helen said with a sheepish grin. "We just wanted to know what was going on."

Elijah scratched the back of his head, avoiding my gaze. "Yeah, we didn't mean to pry. Well, maybe a little."

"Next time, just ask," I told them, trying to keep a stern tone. My best friend and his drag queen partner—they were quite the dynamic duo.

"Will do," Elijah promised, giving me a lopsided grin.

"Good. Now, get back to work," I said, herding them away from the conference room.

"I'll be in touch again soon," Niko promised.

As I watched Niko disappear out the door, I wondered if he would actually succeed in stealing the statue. The thought of him getting caught weighed heavily on me. Then again, Niko was cunning and resourceful; maybe he'd pull it off.

"Let's get to work," I said, and the three of us dove into research. But several hours later, we still hadn't found anything new.

I paused in my search and stared out the window, worry squeezing my heart. We were treading dangerous waters—one wrong move could be our undoing.

But the thrill of the chase, the promise of justice, kept me going. I had always embraced change, whether it came in the form of crazy hair colors or career paths.

“Hey, Tessa!” Helen called out, snapping me back to reality. “You want to grab some lunch? We’ve been working non-stop since this morning.”

“Sure,” I said, suddenly aware of the gnawing hunger in my stomach. I needed food to fuel my ever-churning thoughts.

“Let’s try that new Thai place,” Elijah suggested. “It’s just four doors down, and I heard their pad Thai is to die for.”

“Works for me,” I said, following them inside. As we sat down and ordered our meals, I thought about the case at hand—Oliver, the murders, and that mysterious statue. It was like a puzzle with too many missing pieces, leaving me to fill in the blanks through trial and error.

“Earth to Tessa,” Helen said, waving her hand in front of my face. “You’re spacing out again.”

“Sorry,” I said, forcing myself to focus on the conversation at the table. We chatted about trivial things—gossip, TV shows, the latest fashion trends—but I could tell that we were all merely dancing around the elephant in the room.

As we finished up our lunch and headed back to the office, a sense of urgency goaded me to get back to work.

With every step, I felt more determined to unravel the tangled web of supernatural intrigue that had ensnared us.

## CHAPTER 16



The next morning, I took a sip of my barely-caffeinated-enough coffee as I drove to the office.

Just as I pulled into the parking lot, my phone buzzed with an incoming call. I glanced at the screen—it was Niko.

“Hey,” I answered, putting him on speakerphone. “What’s up?”

“The statue has been stolen,” he said urgently.

“You got it?”

“*No!*”

“Wait, what? I thought you were planning to take it.”

“I was, but someone else got to it first. It wasn’t me, I swear.”

“Okay, I believe you.” I parked in the office lot and sighed.

“So, what are you going to do now?”

“Actually, I was thinking... I’d like to hire you and your team to track down the statue and bring it to me.”

“Really?” I raised an eyebrow, suddenly intrigued by the offer.

“How much are we talking?”

“Enough to make it worth your while.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, my brow furrowing in confusion.

“Aren’t you part-owner of this bounty hunting business? You’d essentially be paying yourself for this job.”

“True,” Niko said, his smooth voice tinged with amusement.

“But this isn’t really an ordinary bounty hunting job, Tessa.

Besides, you're not exactly licensed to do anything other than that, are you?"

I rolled my eyes, even though I knew he couldn't see it. "Fine, you got me there. But I'm still not sure why you want our help on this one."

"Call it a personal interest," he told me cryptically. "Besides, I know you and your team are more than capable of handling this kind of task."

"We'll take the job," I said, curiosity piqued. "What do you know about the statue?"

Niko's voice lowered, as if he was afraid someone might be listening in. "It's an ancient artifact with the power to control all supernatural beings."

My heart skipped a beat, and I felt the hair on the back of my neck standing up.

"Control them?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. "As in, make them do whatever the holder of the statue wants?"

"Exactly," Niko confirmed. "Which is why it's so important that we find it and secure it before it falls into the wrong hands."

I gulped. This was no ordinary hunt; we were dealing with a power that could plunge the world into chaos if misused. "And this is the statue my ex had in his motel room?"

"Yep."

*Fuck...* That could have been worse than I'd ever imagined.

"We'll find the statue and bring it back to you."

"Thanks, Tessa," Niko said solemnly. "Stay safe."

"You too." With that, our conversation ended, and I was left with my thoughts swirling like a storm inside my head.

The gravity of what Niko had just revealed weighed heavily on me, like the clouds threatening rain in the morning sky above me.

This wasn't just another hunt, I realized. It wasn't even just an attempt to clear Oliver's name. This was a race against time, a struggle for the balance of power in the supernatural world.

If the statue truly held such power, it was no wonder everyone seemed to be after it. The potential for abuse was astronomical—a weapon that could control all supernatural beings? That was a terrifying thought.

I sat there in my car, engine idling, as the rain began to fall in soft, steady drops against the windshield. As I stared at the raindrops merging and sliding down the glass, an idea struck me. Maybe it was time for me to diversify my skill set—to become more than just a bounty hunter. A private investigator's license would allow me to delve deeper, to uncover the hidden truths that lurked beneath the surface of every case.

*Maybe it's time to level up,* I told myself.

I switched off the engine, grabbed my bag, and stepped out of the car. The rain soaked through my clothes, but I barely noticed. My mind was on fire, working through the possibilities and strategizing our next move.

"Bring it on," I muttered, staring up at the ominous sky, ready to face whatever storms—literal or metaphorical—came our way.

Pushing open the door to the office, I shook off the water droplets like a wet dog and took in the familiar surroundings: the mismatched furniture, the scent of stale coffee, and the comforting presence of Helen and Elijah. Helen, resplendent in a sequined dress and sky-high heels, was perched on the edge of her desk, while Elijah lounged in his chair, a joint dangling from his lips.

"Guys, we've got something big," I announced, grabbing their attention. "That statue Oliver had? Turns out we were right—it's more than just a murder weapon or a pretty piece of art."

Helen arched a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "Do tell, dearest."

"Apparently, it has the power to control all supernatural beings." The revelation hung in the air, casting an ominous

shadow over our cozy little office.

“Control?” Elijah echoed, sitting up straighter, his eyes wide and alert. “As in, make vampires and werewolves do your bidding?”

“Exactly,” I confirmed, running a hand through my damp hair. “Niko called to say it’s been stolen from police evidence, and he wants us to find it before it falls into the wrong hands.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Helen mused, her fingers tapping rhythmically on the desk. She regarded me steadily, her expression betraying her thrill for the hunt.

“Very.” I met her gaze head-on. “We know there’s at least one supernatural killer out there who’s used this artifact for a nefarious purpose.”

“Count me in, darling,” Helen said, twirling a strand of her platinum blonde Dolly-Parton-style hair around her finger. A wicked grin played on her lips. “Who could resist the allure of a supernatural treasure hunt?”

“I’m in too,” Elijah added. “We can’t just let some supernatural psycho get their hands on this thing.”

I tapped my fingers on the desk. “We need to gather intel on the statue’s whereabouts.”

“Maybe we should hit up some of our contacts in the supernatural underworld,” suggested Elijah, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

I mentally skimmed my list of contacts. “Sure. But we’ve got to be careful—just about any of those guys would sell us out in a heartbeat if they knew what we were after.”

Helen nodded, snapping open her compact mirror and applying a fresh coat of lipstick—probably in preparation to flirt with some of her previous drag-show patrons. “But we won’t get anywhere without taking a few risks.”

“Let’s split up and see who we can shake down for information,” I said. “Meet back here in a couple of hours? We’ll compare notes and plan our next move.”



“Sounds like a plan.” Elijah was already fishing his phone out of his pocket to start making calls.

“Stay safe, you two,” I said. “If we don’t find that statue and fast, there’s no telling what could happen.”

“Same goes for you,” Helen said, giving me a pointed look. “No lone-wolf tactics.”

“Promise,” I replied, my resolve solidifying.

As I stepped back out into the parking lot, I felt the world around me had shifted ever so slightly. The ordinary world around me seemed like a thin veil, masking a hidden world filled with supernatural power struggles and ancient artifacts.

But I knew exactly who I needed to talk to.

No one supernatural, though.

Someone with some serious police connections.

## CHAPTER 17



The door to my Uncle Carlos' apartment creaked open, revealing the dimly lit living room. The familiar scent of old leather and cigar smoke wafted toward me, bringing with it a sense of comfort that only family could provide.

My eyes found Carlos sitting in his wheelchair by the window, his graying hair disheveled and a half-smoked cigar resting between his fingers. He looked up from the newspaper he had been reading and greeted me with a warm smile.

"Ah, Tessa, *mi sobrina favorita*," he said, his voice thick with affection and his Spanish accent still strong despite the decades he'd lived in Dallas.

"Carlos, you know I'm your only niece," I said, chuckling as I made my way over to him.

"Even so," he insisted, a twinkle in his eye. "So, my *only* niece. What brings you to my humble abode?"

I hesitated for a moment, considering my words carefully. "I need your help with something." I reached down to give his hand a reassuring squeeze. "There's been a theft at the police evidence lockup. A statue of...well, a woman. Sort of."

"Interesting," he mused, tapping the ash from his cigar into a nearby glass ashtray. "You think this has something to do with your supernatural bounty hunting business?"

"Maybe," I said. "But I can't be sure until I find out more about it. Do you think you could, y'know, ask around? See if anyone knows anything?"

Carlos gave me a considering look, his dark eyes narrowing slightly as he took in the urgency of my request. He knew better than anyone that the supernatural world was dangerous—especially for someone like me, who hadn't quite mastered the art of hunting its inhabitants. But he also knew I was stubborn, and if he didn't help me, I'd likely charge headfirst into the fray without a second thought.

He seemed to weigh his options before finally reaching for his phone, which rested on the arm of his wheelchair. As he dialed a number with practiced ease, I felt a spark of admiration for my uncle. Even with the limitations of his injury, he never shied away from helping those who needed it.

"Hey, it's Carlos," he said into the phone. "I've got a question for you. You heard anything about that missing evidence from the lockup? The statue?"

As he listened intently to the person on the other end, I paced the room. The air was thick with the scent of his cigar smoke, and I found myself wondering if this addiction had developed before or after his paralysis. It added a certain gritty ambiance to the apartment, making it feel like the perfect setting for a hardboiled detective novel.

"Right, thanks," Carlos said, hanging up the phone. He looked at me, one eyebrow raised. "Okay, what have you gotten yourself into this time?"

"Nothing I can't handle," I insisted, my hands on my hips. "I've been hired to find the missing evidence. What did they say?"

"According to my source, the police think a vampire stole the statue." He paused, letting the words sink in. "The officer guarding the evidence locker had bite marks on his neck and showed signs of having been hypnotized by a vampire."

"Great," I muttered, rolling my eyes.

A vampire.

Like Oliver.

Just when I thought things couldn't get more complicated, the supernatural world threw me another curveball. "Well, at least

we know what we're dealing with now."

"Listen," Carlos said, his voice taking on a more serious tone. "You know as well as I do that vampires are dangerous. Be careful, and don't hesitate to call me if you need help."

"I promise, I'll be careful."

He nodded, seemingly satisfied with my answer.

"And I'll keep in touch," I said as I leaned in to kiss his cheek. He patted my hand, the lines on his face settling into worry.

I stepped out into the warm, humid Texas morning and made my way to my Kia, which was parked haphazardly among the other cars in the lot.

My fingers fumbled with my phone, pulling up the number Oliver had called me from a few days before. My stomach churned with anxiety as I hit call. What if he didn't answer? What if he was in trouble?

What if he was the one who had stolen the statue?

"Hello?" Oliver's voice sounded groggy and disoriented on the other end.

"It's Tessa. I need to talk to you."

"Uh... now's not really a good time," he mumbled, clearly still half-asleep.

"Too bad."

"Jesus, Tess. I can't tell you anything over the phone. Come see me."

"Where are you?"

After a moment's hesitation, Oliver texted me an address and an apartment number. I pulled up the address in my map app, trying to ignore the unease that settled in the pit of my stomach.

"Stay put. I'll be there soon," I warned him before hanging up.

Somehow, I was certain I'd need backup for this one, so I called to make sure they'd be there and then swung by the office to pick up Helen and Elijah.

“Hey, Tessa!” Helen greeted me. She adjusted her oversized sunglasses and grinned. “What’s the plan?”

I filled them in on what Carlos had told me and mentioned needing to meet Oliver.

“Sounds like a party,” Elijah drawled, his expression barely changing as he piled into the backseat of my Kia.

“Okay y’all,” I said, gripping the steering wheel tightly. “Let’s do this.”

We set off toward the address Oliver had given me.

The overcast sky cast eerie shadows around the late-1800s apartment building. Its architecture stood a stark contrast to the modern buildings surrounding it. As we pushed through the creaky door and entered the lobby, an unsettling feeling crawled up my back. This place seemed better suited for ghosts than vampires.

“Wow,” Helen whispered, peering at the intricate moldings and dark red wallpaper. “They don’t make them like this anymore.”

“Looks like something out of a horror movie,” Elijah mumbled, eyeing the antique chandelier that swung gently from the ceiling.

“Let’s just find Oliver and get out of here before any Draculas decide to crash our party,” I muttered, leading them toward the rickety elevator at the back of the lobby.

But as we drew closer, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. Coiled in front of the elevator was a rattlesnake, its scales glistening with an unnatural blue hue. The moment it sensed our presence, the snake’s head rose, and its emerald-green eyes bored into mine. It hissed menacingly, the rattle on its tail vibrating furiously.

“Is that...?” Helen began, her voice wavering.

“Enchanted,” I finished, my heart pounding in my chest. “Great. We brought weapons for vampires, not magical snakes.”

Elijah pulled out the wooden stake he'd shoved into his back pocket. "This'll have to do," he said, swallowing hard.

"Okay, game plan," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "Helen, you distract it with your whip. Elijah, pin it down with the stake. And I'll cut off its head with my knife."

"Are you crazy, Tessa?" Helen hissed, her long fingers tightening around the handle of her bullwhip. "That thing could kill us!"

"Unless you've got a better idea, we're going with my plan," I shot back, gripping the hilt of my knife. "Ready?"

With a deep breath, Helen flicked her wrist, and the whip cracked through the air like a gunshot. The snake's attention snapped to her, its eyes narrowed in fury.

"Quick!" I urged, my heart racing as Elijah lunged forward, his stake aimed at the rattlesnake's body.

In one swift motion, he pinned the snake to the floor, its fangs bared as it writhed in desperation. Seizing the opportunity, I dashed forward, my knife raised high above my head.

"Sorry, slithery friend," I muttered, my thoughts a mix of adrenaline and fear. "But we've got a vampire to find."

With a single downward stroke, I severed the snake's head from its body. The unnatural glow eyes flickered and died, leaving behind nothing but a cold, lifeless rattlesnake—the usual kind for Texas.

"Ugh," Helen groaned, stepping around the decapitated serpent. "I need a drink after that."

"Me too," Elijah said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

As we cautiously entered the elevator, I wondered what other horrors awaited us.

After a slow ascent, the elevator doors creaked open, revealing a dimly lit hallway that reeked of stale cigarette smoke and mold. The worn carpet beneath our feet muffled our footsteps as we approached the apartment number Oliver had given me. I clenched my stake tightly, my anger simmering just below the surface.

“Ready?” I whispered to Helen and Elijah, who nodded in unison behind me. Taking a deep breath, I rapped my knuckles against the door.

“Coming!” Oliver’s voice called from within, sounding muffled and groggy.

When the door swung open, it revealed my ex-husband looking just as surprised as I was angry. His dark hair was disheveled, and his eyes widened at the sight of us. “Tessa? What are you doing here already?”

“Dealing with enchanted rattlesnakes, apparently,” I snapped, thrusting the stake forward, a mere inch away from his heart. “So, you better start talking.”

“Okay, okay.” He held up his hands defensively, stepping back to let us in. “Just put the stake down, will you?”

I hesitated for a moment but relented, lowering the weapon without taking my eyes off him. The apartment was small and cluttered, with dirty clothes strewn everywhere. Clearly, housekeeping wasn’t one of Oliver’s priorities.

“Let’s skip the pleasantries,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “I want answers. What’s going on the statue?”

He sighed, running a hand through his messy hair. “I heard it’s been hidden at the Texas State Fair grounds.”

“Heard?” My skepticism echoed through my voice.

“Yeah. The vampire association who posted my bail? The one I told you about? They followed me to Texas. Apparently they were more concerned with the statue all along.”

“Really?” Helen raised an eyebrow skeptically. “And why should we believe you?”

“Because it’s the only lead I’ve got.” His voice cracked with desperation. “And if I’m going to clear my name, I need that statue.”

“Your name?” I scoffed, irritation prickling at the back of my neck. “This isn’t just about you anymore. People are getting hurt because of this damn thing.”

“Look, I know.” He swallowed hard, his eyes darting between all three of us. “But maybe if we find it, we can put an end to this madness once and for all.”

“Let’s hope so,” Elijah said, his gaze fixed on Oliver. “For your sake and ours.”

I nodded, silently cursing myself for letting Oliver back into my life, even if only momentarily. “We’ll check out the State Fair grounds, but remember—”

“Stay out of trouble,” he finished for me, a weak smile playing on his lips. “I know the drill.”

“Good.” With one last glare, I turned on my heel and led Helen and Elijah out of the apartment, our mission far from over.

As we stepped onto the elevator, I frowned in thought. There was nothing he’d told me that he couldn’t have said over the phone. So why had he insisted I come over?

And why had he been surprised to see me?

Had he intended for me to be hurt—or worse—by the enchanted rattlesnake guarding the elevator?

Fuck. What if he’d tricked me into doing his dirty work for him—whatever that dirty work might be?

Well...no matter what Oliver’s motives might be, I knew what I had to do.

“Let’s go hunt down a supernatural artifact.” I said, pressing the button to take us back down to the lobby.

“Sounds like fun,” Helen said, only half sarcastically.

“Yeah,” I muttered. But really, I was worried that the fun had only just begun.



## CHAPTER 18



**I**n the end, we decided to sneak into the fairgrounds that night, when we were less likely to be seen.

The moon hung low over the Texas State Fairgrounds, casting eerie shadows across the empty parking lot. The venue lay eerily silent, its carnival rides and stalls shuttered until the next event.

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath as I fumbled with the lock on the gate, my fingers slipping from the cold metal. My skills as a supernatural bounty hunter were questionable at best, but even so, I should have been able to pick a simple lock.

“Here, let me try.” Helen’s perfectly manicured hand reached over my shoulder, a lockpicking kit appearing in her grasp as if by magic. With an almost irritating ease, she slid the tools into the lock and clicked it open. “There you go, sweetie.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, embarrassment burning my cheeks.

I thought that maybe Helen would make a better bounty hunter than me. She was stunning, fierce, and always seemed to have everything under control. Meanwhile, I was a petite woman with wild purple curls and a knack for getting myself into trouble.

“Come on,” Helen said gently, sensing my discomfort. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’re a great bounty hunter. You saved Niko Savas, remember?”

“True,” I conceded, trying to push away my self-doubt. “But sometimes I feel like I’m just pretending to be something I’m

not, you know? Like, my mom is always getting on my case, and then there's my dad and his Irish mafia connections... It's just a lot."

"Trust me, girl," Helen said with a smirk, "we all have our baggage. I promise, you're doing just fine. Now, let's get going before anyone notices us sneaking around here."

Elijah led the way as we slipped through the gate. Helen and I followed close behind. The eerily quiet fairgrounds stretched out before us, an abandoned playground of colorful rides and game booths. Shadows played tricks on my eyes, making me imagine shapes lurking in the darkness.

"Any idea where this artifact might be?" Elijah asked, not quite masking how uneasy he clearly felt.

"None," I said.

"Great," Helen said, her usual glamorous demeanor replaced by a more serious air. "So, we're looking for something smaller than a breadbox hidden somewhere in this massive place. What could go wrong?"

No one was willing to jinx it by answering her.

As we ventured further into the fairgrounds, the silence became stifling. The only sound was the crunch of gravel beneath our feet, echoing off the empty stands and rides. A sudden flicker of light caught my eye, and I turned to see the Midway sign illuminated by a ghostly glow.

"Guys, look!" I whispered, pointing at the sign. "Think that's our cue?"

"Could be." Helen's eyes narrowed in concentration. "Or it could be a trap. Either way, it's our best lead right now."

"Let's check it out," Elijah suggested. He glanced around nervously, as if expecting some supernatural monster to leap out from the shadows.

We crept toward the Midway, adrenaline coursing through my veins. With every step, I felt like we were being watched, as though unseen eyes were following our every move. My hand

itched to grab the silver knife tucked away in my boot, but I refrained, not wanting to startle my friends.

*Stay alert*, I reminded myself as we ventured deeper into the heart of the fairgrounds.

The illuminated Midway sign guided us through the darkness. With each passing moment, I felt the shadows closing in around us, tightening their grip like the coils of some monstrous serpent.

The scent of stale popcorn and cotton candy residue wafted through the air as we made our way along the Midway. The ghostly echo of laughter from fairs past almost seemed to linger. As we walked, the carousel suddenly sprang to life, its bright lights casting eerie shadows on the ground. I jumped as the haunting melody of the calliope filled the night, and the painted horses spun around, their glass eyes staring blankly into the darkness.

“Okay, that’s it,” Elijah muttered, his voice laced with fear. “I’m officially freaked out. Can we go now?”

I couldn’t blame him for feeling that way. The carousel was like something straight out of a horror movie, and I half expected a possessed doll to come riding out on one of the horses.

“Relax, sweetheart,” Helen said. “This might be a sign that we’re on the right track. We can’t just give up because things are getting a little spooky.”

“Easy for you to say,” Elijah grumbled, glancing uneasily at the spinning carousel. “You’re not the one who’s going to have nightmares about this later.”

“Maybe next time, don’t watch so many horror movies before a stakeout,” I teased, trying to lighten the mood. I had to admit, though, the creepy vibe wasn’t exactly helping my own nerves.

“Fine, we’ll keep going,” Elijah sighed, running a hand through his bangs and pushing them back out of his eyes. “But if I end up needing therapy after this, you two are paying.”

Helen nodded. “Now let’s see where this haunted carnival ride leads us.”

I forced a smile, trying to project an air of confidence I didn’t quite feel. Deep down, I knew that we couldn’t afford to back down now. The artifact we sought held the key to clearing Oliver’s name—and, let’s be honest, it would also look really good on my resume. As the carousel continued its ghostly dance, I swallowed hard. “Okay,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Let’s do this.”

No sooner had the words left my mouth than the Ferris wheel at the end of the Midway suddenly lit up, the colorful lights casting eerie shadows across the abandoned fairgrounds. The wheel began to spin, accompanied by the blaring music of an old-timey organ.

“Seriously?” Elijah whimpered, his eyes wide with fear. “First the carousel, now this?”

I shared in his unease; there was something undeniably creepy about the deserted amusement park coming to life before our very eyes. Even Helen, who usually reveled in all things dramatic, seemed a little rattled.

“Come on, darling,” she said, her voice betraying a hint of tension as she grabbed my arm. “We can’t let a few ghostly parlor tricks scare us off.”

“Right,” I muttered, forcing myself to keep moving.

“Besides,” Helen continued, attempting to regain her usual bravado, “if anything tries to jump out and grab us, I’ll just whip it into submission.”

“Thanks, Helen,” I said, thankful her attempt to lighten the mood. “I feel so much better knowing we’re protected by a drag queen with a bullwhip.”

“Hey, don’t underestimate the power of a fabulous weapon,” she said with a wink.

As we made our way deeper into the Midway, I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were being watched. Glancing back over my shoulder, I thought I saw Big Tex, the giant statue of a cowboy that loomed over the entrance, look directly at me and

give a sly wink. I blinked, and suddenly he was just a statue again, frozen in his usual jovial pose.

“Y’all,” I whispered, my heart pounding in my chest, “I think Big Tex just winked at me.”

“Impossible,” Helen scoffed. “He’s just a statue, Tessa.”

I tried to convince myself that my imagination was simply running wild. “But you can’t deny that something strange is going on here.”

“And the sooner we find this artifact and get out of here, the better,” Elijah said, his voice barely more than a breathy whisper.

“Okay,” I said, taking another deep breath. “Let’s keep going. We can do this.”

As we pressed on, following the trail of supernatural breadcrumbs, anticipation curled through my stomach. We were getting closer to uncovering the truth. I was sure of it.

As we ventured further into the eerie Midway, I felt like a character in a paranormal suspense novel. The atmosphere was thick with tension as we tiptoed between darkened stalls and abandoned games.

Suddenly, a small gift shop came into view. As if on cue, the lights inside started blinking erratically, drawing our attention. We exchanged glances, sharing an unspoken agreement that this might be the place we were looking for.

“Come on.” I lead the way toward the shop.

Peering through the dusty windows, I spotted what we were searching for—the statue, nestled among a collection of knickknacks.

It seemed almost too easy, yet there it was, waiting for us to retrieve it.

“Guys, I think I found it,” I whispered, pointing to the statue. “Keep watch while I grab it, okay?”

“Sure thing,” Elijah murmured, nervously clutching at the sleeves of his hoodie.

“Wait,” I hesitated, realizing the door was locked. “Helen, can you pick this for me?”

“Of course.” Without missing a beat, she pulled out her kit again and started working on the door.

“Got it,” Helen whispered triumphantly as the door clicked open.

“Thanks,” I muttered, my heart racing as I stepped inside the shadowy gift shop, where the blinking lights cast eerie patterns on the walls, making the whimsical souvenirs appear sinister. I shook off the sense of foreboding and focused on the statue perched among the trinkets.

“Be quick,” Helen whispered from behind me, her voice tinged with urgency.

“Working on it,” I muttered under my breath, carefully weaving my way through the cramped aisles. The scent of old wood and dust hung heavily in the air, tickling my nose. I was tempted to sneeze, but suppressed it, not wanting to draw unwanted attention.

As I reached out for the statue, my fingertips brushed against its smooth surface. A tremor ran through me, as though an electric current passed into me from it.

I hesitated for a moment, then wrapped my fingers around the small statue and pulled it from the shelf. It felt heavier than I had expected, a reminder of the power it held.

And it was every bit as creepy as I remembered.

“Got it!” I announced quietly, cradling the statue to my chest.

“Great,” Elijah breathed. “Now let’s get out of here.”

Without another word, I made my way back toward the entrance. My heart pounded in my ears, drowning out the creaking floorboards beneath my feet. Every instinct told me we needed to leave—fast.

“Wait,” Helen murmured, her eyes narrowing as she examined the deserted Midway. “Did y’all hear that?”

“I didn’t hear anything.” I tried to shake off the creeping sensation that something wasn’t right. “Come on, let’s go.”

We hurried along the empty Midway, the once-bright carnival games and rides, having gone dark, now looming like dark specters around us. I clutched the statue tighter against my chest.

“Once we’re out, don’t look back,” I said firmly.

Helen agreed, her gaze darting around nervously. Elijah merely nodded, his face pale beneath the moonlight.

We pressed on, our footsteps echoing through the silence. The entrance was in sight, and with each step, I felt freedom getting closer.

“Almost there,” I whispered, daring to hope that we’d make it out without any further complications.

About fifteen yards from the entrance, I felt a sudden chill in the air that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. “Guys,” I whispered, stopping so abruptly that Helen nearly collided with me. “Something’s not right.”

“Wha—” Elijah started to say, but before he could finish, a beautiful blonde woman appeared seemingly out of nowhere, her eyes a piercing blue—and her fangs bared.

A vampire.

“Hand over the statue, or your friend dies,” she hissed, grabbing Elijah by the throat and lifting him effortlessly into the air. He choked and clawed at her hand, his legs kicking futilely.

“Who are you?” I demanded, my heart hammering in my chest as I tightened my grip on the statue.

“Someone who wants that statue you’re holding,” she said coldly. “Now give it to me, or he dies.”

“Let him go first,” I said, trying to sound braver than I felt. “Then we can talk.”

“Nice try,” the vampire sneered. “But I’m not here to negotiate. Give me the statue, or this ends badly for all of

you.”

For an instant, I almost did what she told me to.

But then I remembered.

*I'm holding an artifact that allows me to control all supernatural creatures.*

I clasped it in both hands and glared at the vampire. “Put Elijah down and let us walk out of here unharmed,” I ordered her.



## CHAPTER 19



Nothing happened.

Elijah's eyes were beginning to roll back in his head.

After a second, the vampire laughed aloud, the sound like a cross between bells and nails on a chalkboard. "You have no idea how to use it," she said, crowing in delight.

"Fine. Take it," I muttered, the taste of defeat bitter on my tongue as I reluctantly handed over the ancient artifact to the vampire looming before me. My heart sank, loaded down with failure, but I knew there was no choice. Elijah and Helen depended on my compliance.

"I knew you'd see reason," the vampire purred, her icy blue eyes filled with triumph as she claimed the prize. Slowly, she lowered Elijah to his feet, loosening her grip on his throat—but she didn't let him go.

"Reason? You threatened my friends," I snapped back, anger flaring within me. But even as I tried to stand tall against this supernatural menace, I felt hopeless and powerless. What good was a supernatural bounty hunter if she couldn't protect her loved ones?

"Survival is a powerful motivator." Her voice dripped with condescension. And then, in an instant, she moved with supernatural speed, whipping Elijah around to face her and sinking her teeth into his neck. He cried out in pain, his hands clawing at the vampire's shoulders in desperation.

"Get off him!" I shouted, adrenaline pumping through my veins as I pulled my stake from my back pocket and charged

toward the vampire. Every fiber of my being screamed for me to save my best friend.

“¡*Dios mío!* Elijah!” The sound of my mother’s native Spanish escaped my lips as my fear and worry surged.

If only I had been better prepared, more skilled...maybe we wouldn’t be in this mess.

“Stay back, Tessa!” Elijah managed to choke out, despite the fangs lodged in his throat.

“Let him go!” My voice trembled, but my resolve was ironclad. I would not let this vampire harm Elijah any further.

She pulled away from his neck.

“Or what?” the vampire taunted, staring into my eyes as if daring me to make a move. “You’ll stab me? You’re too weak.”

“Try me.”

“Fine,” the vampire hissed as she abruptly released her grip on Elijah. With a wicked grin, she hurled him in my direction like a ragdoll. I barely managed to brace myself before his body collided with mine, stumbling back from the impact.

I grunted, struggling to keep both of us upright. “Elijah, are you okay?”

“Get...her...” he whispered, pain lines carved around his eyes. His best friend instincts were kicking in even through the agony.

“Enough of this nonsense,” Helen declared, her voice booming across the Texas State Park. She had been standing off to the side, momentarily forgotten in the chaos. But now, as she stepped forward and unfurled her whip, she was a force to be reckoned with. The vampire’s eyes widened with surprise at Helen’s sudden transformation.

Helen growled, cracking her whip in the air with practiced ease. For a moment, I saw fear flicker in the vampire’s gaze as she scrambled to put some distance between herself and Helen.

“Take care of Elijah,” Helen ordered me before dashing after the vampire, her long legs propelling her forward with incredible speed. The sight of her bouffant hair bouncing in time with each stride would have been comical if not for the dire situation we found ourselves in.

I wanted to dash after them, but my anxiety for Elijah kept me rooted to the spot, unwilling to abandon him. Instead, my focus shifted to assessing the damage done to my best friend’s neck, pushing aside the guilt that threatened to consume me.

“Sorry, Tess,” he mumbled, wincing as I carefully touched the puncture wounds, making sure they weren’t too deep. “Didn’t mean to be a burden.”

“Never, Elijah,” I reassured him, my heart aching for his pain. My mind raced with thoughts of what might have happened if I hadn’t reached him in time, and the cold grip of fear threatened to choke me.

“Come on, let’s get you somewhere safe before Helen returns with our fanged enemy,” I suggested, looping Elijah’s arm around my shoulders and helping him to his feet. “We’re not out of this yet.”

“Right,” he said weakly, leaning heavily against me as we began to move away from the scene of our latest supernatural showdown.

Before I could respond, Helen rushed back, her whip coiled around her forearm. The ferocity in her eyes had been replaced by frustration. “I lost her,” she panted, hands on her hips. “The sneaky bloodsucker climbed up Big Tex and jumped down the other side of the fence.”

“Big Tex?” I exclaimed, incredulous. “That’s...impressive.”

“And infuriating,” Helen sighed. “I almost had her, too.”

We stood there, the three of us, feeling our failure as the powerful artifact slipped even further from our grasp.

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THE MOON CAST A SOMBER GLOW OVER THE EMPTY PARKING lot as we trudged toward my car, our footsteps echoing in the silence. My hand trembled slightly as I fumbled with the keys and unlocked the door. We piled in wordlessly, our defeat following us into the car.

“Seatbelt, Helen,” I reminded her gently as I started the engine, the car coming to life. She clicked it into place without protest, her usual vivacious energy conspicuously absent.

We drove in silence, the darkness outside pressing in around us like a thick fog. My mind spun with images of the blonde vampire sinking her teeth into Elijah’s neck, and my heart clenched painfully at the memory.

I hated that sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach, the doubt that whispered we might not be good enough.

“Y’all,” I started hesitantly, “do you ever wonder if maybe we’re in over our heads? What if we can’t do this?”

Elijah and Helen exchanged glances.

“Nope,” Helen said, a fire igniting in her eyes, “we’re a team. And in the words of my favorite pop queen, ‘We are never gonna survive unless we get a little crazy.’ So let’s go get crazy.”

Damn straight,” Elijah said, his strength returning. “We’re the baddest supernatural bounty hunters around, and no vampire is going to change that.”

“So let’s get back to work,” Helen declared, her voice filled with resolve. “We have an artifact to find and a vampire to stake.”

I blew out a breath and nodded. “Okay.” But when I got back to Helen’s car and dropped them off, I had to ask, “See you tomorrow?”

“Definitely,” Elijah said, patting my shoulder reassuringly. “Now go get some rest. You deserve it.”

As I headed home, my thoughts swirled with doubt.

*Get a grip, I told myself. You’ve got work to do.*

But as I pulled into my apartment complex and killed the engine, the image of Elijah's bloodied neck haunted me once more.

"Never again," I vowed aloud, clenching my fists. "I won't let anyone else I care about get hurt."

And with that promise echoing in my ears, I stepped out of the car and into the night.

I moved into my apartment, the quiet darkness amplifying my already foul mood, and I closed the door behind me with a soft click. The silence was deafening, only disrupted by the steady tick-tock of the wall clock in the living room.

"Maybe it's time to consider a new career," I muttered. "A florist, maybe? Or a baker?"

"I always thought you'd make a great wedding planner," a familiar voice drawled from the shadows.

"Oliver," I breathed, my hand instinctively reaching for the stake tucked into the waistband of my jeans. "What are you doing here?"

"Relax," he said, stepping into the dim light filtering through the curtains. His fangs glinted ominously as he smirked at me. "I'm not here to cause trouble."

"Could've fooled me," I shot back, gripping the stake tighter. "You have a habit of showing up when I least expect it."

"Isn't that part of the fun?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "Besides, I heard about your little... mishap tonight."

"Who says I had a mishap?" I countered, trying to maintain a brave façade despite the guilt pawing at me.

"Come on," Oliver chided, crossing his arms. "I know you better than that. You're doubting yourself, wondering if this life is really worth it."

"Stop acting like you know me," I snapped, fighting the urge to hurl the stake at him. "You don't get to waltz in here and act like you're concerned about me."

Oliver leaned in closer to me. “I also just received some crucial information about the real killer’s plans,” he said, his breath cold and slightly rancid against my face.

## CHAPTER 20



I flinched away from Oliver, just as I had before.  
*Blood-breath. Eeeuuww.*

“Spit it out then,” I demanded, my voice wavering slightly as I tried to hide my fear. My heart pounded in my chest like a jackhammer, fueled by adrenaline and anxiety. There was something about Oliver that always threw me off balance, but I couldn’t let him see that.

“Okay, but you have to promise me something first,” Oliver said, a hint of vulnerability flickering in his eyes. “Revealing a weakness that you can exploit to defeat another vampire could put my life in danger. You have to promise to protect me from her.”

“Seriously?” I scoffed, crossing my arms. Part of me wanted to walk away, to leave him to deal with whatever mess he’d gotten himself into—but I couldn’t. The stakes were too high, and my curiosity ate at me like a hungry rat.

“Fine, I promise,” I said, my voice steady and sincere, despite the chaos churning inside me. “I won’t let the vampire hurt you.” But even as the words left my lips, I wondered if I was making a colossal mistake.

Relief washed over his features once again. The vulnerability in his eyes stirred something within me—something raw and aching human. It was a strange feeling, considering our history.

“Now spill,” I urged, my impatience flaring like wildfire. “What’s this crucial information?”

Oliver hesitated, then blurted out, “The statue I had... it was a fake.”

My heart skipped a beat, the world around us seeming to fall away as I grappled with the implications of his revelation. A fake? I felt the gears in my mind shifting, reshaping my understanding of the situation and forcing me to reevaluate everything I thought I knew.

The shock of Oliver’s revelation left me momentarily speechless, the air around me seeming to vibrate with tension. I blinked, trying to absorb the information. The statue was a fake? My mind raced, sorting through the implications of this new piece of the puzzle.

“Wait,” I said, shaking my head in disbelief, then asking my questions aloud. “The statue was a fake? How do you know?” I eyed Oliver suspiciously, wondering if he was playing some sort of twisted game with me. He wasn’t exactly known for his honesty during our short-lived marriage, after all.

“Trust me on this one.” Oliver’s eyes pled for understanding. “I don’t know all the details,” Oliver said. “But I do know that the real killer is still out there, plotting her next move. And she’s more dangerous than any of us could have imagined.”

*Shit.* No wonder the statue hadn’t worked when I tried to use it.

“Great,” I muttered, my sarcasm as thick as molasses. “Just when I thought things couldn’t get any weirder.”

With my heart pounding in my chest, I quickly pulled out my phone and sent a frantic text to everyone.

Meet me in my office NOW. Urgent. No time to explain.

“Okay, let’s go,” I said. “We need to get everyone on board before we confront this vampire.”

“Are you sure about this?” Oliver asked hesitantly. “You’re putting yourself in danger by helping me.”

“Damn right, I am,” I shot back, flashing him a fierce grin. “But I’ve never been one to shy away from danger, have I?”



Besides, we're going to need all the help we can get if we want to take down this vampire bitch."

As we neared my office, I felt the anticipation building within me, crackling through the air.

The moment I pushed open the door to my office, I felt the tension in the air. Helen and Elijah stared at Oliver, while Riker and Niko stood in the corner, both looking decidedly unimpressed.

I didn't even have time to say anything before Oliver hissed at Niko, who responded with a low growl, his eyes narrowing dangerously. Riker's hand shot to his belt, pulling out a stake with lightning speed. I quickly stepped between them and Oliver, raising my hands in a placating gesture.

"Stop!" I shouted, my voice echoing through the small space. "We're not here to fight each other. We're here because there's another vampire out there who wants to control all supernaturals. And right now, she thinks she has the artifact that will allow her to do it—but she doesn't. She has a fake."

"Wait, a fake?" Riker asked, his stake still clutched tightly in his hand. He glanced between me and Oliver, clearly trying to gauge the truth of my words.

"Oliver managed to switch it out before she got her hands on it," I explained, giving him a nod. "But that means she's going to come after us—and we need to be ready."

The room was silent as everyone processed this startling revelation, their expressions ranging from disbelief to grudging acceptance. I felt their gazes on me, but I refused to let doubt creep into my mind.

"Okay," Riker said finally, his tone measured. "So what's the plan?"

"First things first," I said. "We need to stick together. That's the only way we'll stand a chance against her. Are y'all with me?" I asked.

"Always," Elijah murmured, his gaze steady and unwavering, while Helen simply nodded, her eyes fierce and resolute.

“Let’s do this.” Niko’s werewolf strength simmered just beneath the surface, and even Riker seemed to relax slightly, his stake disappearing back into his belt.

“Okay then,” I said, taking a deep breath to steady myself.

I glanced around the dimly lit office, my heart pounding in my chest as I tried to piece together a plan that would lead us to victory.

“Here’s what I’m thinking,” I began, my voice shaking ever so slightly. “This vampire believes she can control all supernaturals using the artifact that she thinks she has. But she’s bound to figure out soon enough that it’s a fake. Before that happens, we attack.”

I looked at Niko, who raised an eyebrow at me, curiosity piqued. “You’ll be our secret weapon. When the time is right, you’ll attack her. She’ll try to control you using the nonexistent power of the artifact, but when she fails... well, let’s just say her surprise will give us the opening we need.”

The room fell silent as everyone absorbed the plan. I held my breath, hoping that they would see the merit in my idea despite its simplicity.

“Sounds risky,” Riker grumbled, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

“Of course it’s risky,” I shot back, exasperated. “But it’s the best chance we’ve got. We need to trust each other—and we need to act fast.”

“And if she realizes she has a fake before that?” Oliver asked.

“Then we get her to meet us to make a trade, where we give her another fake—and then we attack.”

“I’m in,” Niko said.

“You’re going to do this whether I’m in or not, aren’t you?” Riker asked me.

I nodded.

After a long moment of silence, Riker finally said, “Then I guess I’m in, too.”

## CHAPTER 21



I stood in the office, my heart pounding like a jackhammer. Oliver had just informed me he knew how to contact the vampire.

“Are you sure you can trust her?” I asked, trying to keep the anxiety from creeping into my voice.

“Trust isn’t a word I’d use.” Oliver gave a smirk. “But she’ll meet us. I’ll call her now.”

As he dialed the number, I glanced over at Riker, who wore a stern expression, his muscular arms crossed over his chest. He didn’t like relying on Oliver’s connections, and neither did I. But we didn’t have many options.

“Hello,” Oliver said into the phone. “I think it’s time for us to meet in person.” He paused, listening to her response. “Because I have something for you. How about the Reunion Tower? The Observation Deck would be perfect.” Another pause. “Excellent. See you soon.”

He hung up and turned to us. “She’s agreed to meet us there. Let’s get moving.”

Helen, Elijah, Riker, Niko, and I exchanged wary glances before following Oliver out of the office and into several cars.

As we headed toward the Dallas Reunion Tower, I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were walking into a trap.

But what choice did we have? If we were going to catch this vampire, we needed to take risks.

The Reunion Tower loomed ahead, its structure piercing the darkening sky like a needle—if a needle had a globe sitting atop it.

As we approached, I thought that this rendezvous might be the end of us. But there was no turning back now. And if I was lucky, I'd survive long enough to see another sunrise.

The city lights blurred past us like a kaleidoscope as I gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles. Oliver, Helen, and Elijah sat in tense silence, our impending confrontation hanging in the air.

“Okay, everyone,” I said, taking a deep breath as we exited the car. “Stay close and follow Oliver’s lead. And remember, no matter what happens, we stick together.”

“Lead the way, Count Dracula,” Helen said with a wicked grin. Oliver merely rolled his eyes and began to lead us toward the tower.

The elevator ride to the Observation Deck felt like an eternity, my nerves fraying with each passing second. When the doors finally slid open, revealing a breathtaking view of the Dallas skyline, I felt a pang of sadness. This city had been my home for so long, and now it felt as though everything was on the verge of falling apart.

We spread out along the Observation Deck, watching for any sign of the vampire.

When she stepped out from the shadows, her blood-red lips curled into a wicked smile, she held the fake statue in her hands.

“Oliver,” she purred, her voice silkier than the black dress that clung to her body. “What could you possibly have to offer me that is better than this?” She held up the statue.

“Something far more valuable than that statue,” Oliver said coolly, his eyes never leaving hers.

“Really?” She raised a perfectly arched eyebrow, clearly intrigued. “And what, pray tell, is this mysterious treasure?”

“Patience, my dear,” Oliver replied with a smirk. “Niko, why don’t you show her?”

At his cue, Niko stepped forward, his gaze seizing on Elizabeth. With a deep breath, he began to run toward her, and my stomach twisted with anxiety as I realized what was about to happen.

Niko leaped into the air, his body shifting into a massive black wolf in midair. The transformation was breathtaking, a testament to the raw power that lay within him.

I screamed internally, panic surging through me. What if it didn’t work?

And as we stood on the edge of the precipice, staring into the abyss, I prayed that our gamble would pay off.

The vampire, as if anticipating Niko’s attack, held up the statue with a smirk. She spoke a few words in a language I couldn’t comprehend, her voice melodic and chilling at the same time. The air around us seemed to crackle, laden with power, as the strange incantation hung in the air.

Niko’s yelp echoed through the night, a sharp, pained sound that tore through my heart. His body crumpled to the ground mid-leap, the black wolf now nothing more than a heap of fur and limbs.

I stared, utterly confused.

“Good job, my love,” the vampire cooed, her voice dripping with sweet poison as she turned to Oliver with a smug grin. Oliver stepped toward her, and she placed a hand on his arm, her long red nails contrasting against his pale skin.

“I knew you’d be able to handle it, Elizabeth.” Oliver placed his own hand over hers.

My heart clenched at his words.

Elizabeth.

The vampire who had turned him.

Oliver had told me Elizabeth was dead, but here she was, alive and well.

And that statue—it had worked perfectly well, controlling Niko.

My hand stole up to cover my mouth as the realization struck me like a bolt of lightning: they were the ones behind the murders. How could I have been so blind?

“You bastard,” I hissed at Oliver, anger and betrayal roiling within me.

Oliver sighed, sounding almost regretful. “I had hoped it wouldn’t come to this. But you just wouldn’t quit digging. And then you killed my snake.” He shook his head sadly.

“I will kill you,” I spat, glaring daggers at him.

“Enough,” Elizabeth ordered, her cold gaze sliding over to me. “We have bigger matters to attend to.” She sauntered toward Niko, every step deliberate and predatory. “Now, let’s see what we can do with our furry friend here.”

“Leave him alone,” I said, instinctively trying to move closer to protect Niko, but Riker held me back.

“Easy,” he murmured. “Let’s not make things worse.”

As Elizabeth stood over Niko, her gaze locked onto his. “Obey me,” she commanded, her voice resonating with power. “Get up.”

Niko hesitated for a moment, growling deep in his throat, before begrudgingly pushing himself to his feet. It was clear that something within him was fighting her control, but ultimately, he couldn’t resist her.

“Good boy,” Elizabeth cooed, smirking at me. “Now, no more growling. We wouldn’t want any unnecessary noise, would we?”

Niko’s growl died away, replaced by a low whine. I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms. My anger burned hot, but I tried to keep it in check—for now.

“Oliver,” I said, struggling to keep my voice steady. “You don’t have to do this. You can walk away from her. From all of this.”

“Ah,” he replied, shaking his head sadly. “If only it were that simple. But the truth is, Elizabeth and I are bound together by something far stronger than you could ever understand.”

“Betrayal?” I shot back bitterly. “Murder?”

“Love,” he whispered, his eyes filled with a strange mix of sorrow and longing. “A love that will last for all eternity.”

As he spoke those words, my heart shattered into a thousand tiny pieces. It was clear there was no saving Oliver now.

Elizabeth’s smile was a chilling thing, her fangs glistening in the dim light of the Observation Deck. “So, my dear,” she began, her voice dripping with false sweetness. “What would you rather be? A vampire, like me? Or a werewolf, like your friend over there?”

I shuddered at the thought, my stomach churning with revulsion. As much as I cared for Niko, respected him, even, neither option held any appeal for me—both meant giving up my humanity. And that was something I refused to do, no matter the cost. “Neither,” I spat out defiantly, meeting her cold gaze with all the courage I could muster. “I’d rather die than become one of you.”

“Such a shame,” Elizabeth said, her eyes narrowing slightly. “But then again, I’ve always found humans to be so... limited in their thinking. So unwilling to embrace the possibilities that lie before them.”

“Maybe we just prefer being alive and in control of our own lives,” I shot back, my anger flaring once more.

“Control?” Elizabeth laughed, a cruel, mocking sound. “You have no idea the power we wield, the freedom we enjoy. But perhaps, in time, you will come to understand.”

As her words hung in the air, a deep sense of guilt settled in my chest. This was my fault; I had led everyone here, right into the heart of danger. And what if it cost them their lives? The thought was too awful to bear.

My gaze darted around the room, searching out my people, meeting their gazes, hoping they understood how sorry I was that my plan had failed.

But I couldn't see any sign of Elijah or Riker. They were nowhere to be found.

Had they managed to escape? I prayed they had.

But I worried there was something far worse awaiting them in the shadows.

Then I saw where they'd gone.

They were behind Elizabeth.

They'd become the worse things in the shadows, I realized, and my heart gave a silent cheer.



## CHAPTER 22



**H**ope sparked within me, growing stronger as Elijah and Riker exchanged significant glances in the background.

I knew she had to buy them time, keep Elizabeth talking while they planned their next move.

“Actually,” I said, “Maybe I’ll choose to be changed, after all. I’m curious about vampire life. What would you say is the best part of being one?”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed as if she sensed my ploy but chose to play along. Her full lips curled into a mocking smile, revealing gleaming fangs. “Oh, there are so many delightful aspects to choose from.”

My heartbeat quickened as I waited for Elizabeth’s response, my fingers twitching around the stake hidden in my back pocket. In my peripheral vision, I could see Elijah and Riker moving stealthily through the shadows, their faces set.

“Take your time,” I said, forcing myself to maintain eye contact with the deadly vampire. “I’m sure it’s difficult to narrow down the list.”

Elizabeth threw her head back and laughed, the sound echoing off the walls like the cackling of a demented crow. “The blood,” she said, her voice dripping with wicked delight. “And the killing, of course. There’s nothing quite like the thrill of the hunt, don’t you agree?”

I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the way my stomach churned at Elizabeth’s words. I’d seen plenty of blood and violence in my time as a supernatural bounty hunter, but

hearing it spoken of so casually, so... gleefully, made my skin crawl.

“Right,” I said, fighting to keep my voice even. “I guess that makes sense, given your, uh, dietary requirements.” I glanced over at Niko, who stood nearby in his wolf form, his gaze fixed intently on Elizabeth. “What about you? What’s the best part of being a werewolf?”

Niko remained silent, his ears flicking back and forth as though he were considering his answer. But of course, no answer came; as long as he was in his wolf form, he wouldn’t be able to speak.

I raised my eyebrows at Elizabeth, a sardonic smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. “Guess we’ll have to wait for him to shift back before we can get his opinion, huh?”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed at my smirk, and she flicked her gaze toward Niko. “Well then,” she said icily, “why don’t we have him shift back? I’m sure we’d all love to hear his opinion on the matter.” The vampire’s voice held a sinister edge.

“Fine,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. I glanced at Niko, giving him a slight nod of encouragement, hoping he understood my intentions.

Niko’s large wolf form tensed for a moment before he began to shift back into his human form. His body contorted and twisted in ways that seemed unnatural, causing me to wince. As he finished shifting, he was left completely naked on the floor, and despite the tense atmosphere, I stole a quick appreciative glance at his sculpted body.

*Get your head in the game, Fury.*

Niko glared daggers at Elizabeth as he rose to his feet, making no effort to cover himself. His eyes shone with defiance, and I found myself admiring his courage. He turned to address me, his voice steady. “The best thing about being a werewolf is the wild freedom it brings. The ability to run through the woods, feeling the earth beneath my paws, and knowing that no one can control me.”

“Wild freedom, huh?” I worked to maintain a lighthearted tone while keeping an eye on Elizabeth. “Sounds pretty great.”

“Indeed,” Niko murmured, meeting my gaze with an intensity that made my heart race. “It’s something I wouldn’t trade for anything.”

Elizabeth’s lips curled into a sinister smile as she regarded Niko. “Well, perhaps you and I have something in common after all,” she mused, her voice lilting like the melody of a twisted lullaby. I shuddered at the thought. “Freedom.” Elizabeth’s eyes gleamed wickedly. “We both relish in the power our supernatural natures grant us.”

How could this monster compare her bloodlust to Niko’s love for running free? But it wasn’t the time to argue.

Elizabeth continued. “The thrill of the hunt, the taste of blood... It’s exhilarating, isn’t it?” She glanced at Niko, who still stood defiantly naked, his gaze never leaving hers.

“Uh-huh,” I muttered, struggling to contain my revulsion. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Riker sneaking up behind Elizabeth. He had a stake clutched tightly in his hand, and my heart leaped.

But just as Riker was about to strike, Elijah burst onto the scene, leaping in front of me and landing precariously onto the railing near the windows. His hair fell across his eyes as he waved a burning marijuana joint at a smoke detector, an absurd grin plastered across his face.

“Hey, Eliza-bitch!” he shouted, ferocity blazing in his eyes. “You forgot one thing about us humans—we’re full of surprises!”

My heart pounded in my chest, torn between laughter and terror at Elijah’s audacity.

“Is this some kind of pathetic joke?” Elizabeth snarled, her fangs bared menacingly.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Elijah retorted, his grin never faltering as he continued waving the joint at the detector.

The shrill sound of the fire alarm pierced the tense atmosphere, followed by a sudden downpour of water from the overhead sprinklers. In that chaotic moment, Riker sprang into action, lunging at Elizabeth with the stake gripped firmly in his hand.

“You absolute fucking *legend*,” I murmured under my breath, watching as he drove the wooden weapon through Elizabeth’s back and into her heart. Her body convulsed violently as she screamed, the sound guttural and chilling. Blood trickled down her perfect face like crimson tears, and I felt a sick sense of satisfaction.

“Elizabeth!” Oliver cried out, his eyes wide with horror. He moved with supernatural speed, diving toward her fallen form and reaching for the statue clutched in her lifeless hand. Anger surged through me, propelling me forward in an all-out tackle that sent us both crashing to the ground.

“Stay down,” I growled, pinning him beneath me. “I’m not letting you get away with this.”

“Let me go,” he snarled, his fangs bared as he struggled against my grip. His once enchanting eyes now glowed with an eerie red hue, and I shuddered at the monster he’d become. How had I ever been married to this creature?

“Riker!” I called out, still staring into Oliver’s eyes. “Is she...?”

“Dead.” Riker’s voice cut through the sound of the fire alarm, answering my unfinished question. A wave of relief washed over me, but I knew we weren’t out of the woods just yet. There were still far too many monsters lurking in the shadows.

“Good riddance,” I muttered, barely able to contain my triumphant grin. As I glanced back at Oliver, I could see the fury burning in his eyes.

The sound of Helen’s whip cracking like a bolt of lightning filled the room, drawing my attention away from Oliver. I watched as the whip snaked out past us, effortlessly wrapping around the statue that had been Elizabeth’s prize. With a flick of her wrist, Helen pulled it to her, clutching it possessively.

“Got it, love!” she shouted triumphantly, her voice barely audible over the blaring fire alarm and the relentless drumming of the sprinklers. I felt a surge of pride for my friend—even in the midst of chaos, Helen always managed to steal the spotlight.

“Nice catch,” I called back, still straddling a furious Oliver. But my victory was short-lived. With a wrenching shove, Oliver pushed me off of him and sprang to his feet.

“You don’t have to do this,” I said, knowing deep down that my words would likely fall on deaf ears. “We can figure something out. You don’t have to die too.”

“Save your breath,” Oliver snarled contemptuously, his eyes burning with a mixture of anger and desperation. “You can’t talk your way out of this one.”

“Maybe not,” I conceded, my heart pounding as I prepared myself for whatever came next. “But I’ll be damned if I don’t try.”

“Watch out!” Niko’s voice boomed, his warning drowning out all other sounds. I glanced back just in time to see him grab the stake from my back pocket, his eyes fixed on Oliver, who stumbled backward.

Niko’s move knocked me to the floor, and I didn’t move, watching the events unfolding before me.

As Oliver tried to regain his footing, Niko lunged forward, the stake poised and ready. In a single fluid motion, he plunged it through Oliver’s chest, silencing my ex-husband once and for all.

As Oliver’s body slumped to the floor, I felt a strange sense of loss. Despite everything he’d done, there was a small part of me that still mourned the man he’d once been.

“Thanks, Niko,” I whispered.

He simply nodded, his gaze reflecting both relief and sadness.

And as I glanced around at the chaos, I knew that my world had changed forever.

But in that moment, surrounded by friends who were willing to fight by my side, I felt more powerful than I'd ever imagined possible.

Definitely more than anything Elizabeth could ever have experienced.

## CHAPTER 23



**W**e just saved the entire supernatural community from whatever sinister plans Oliver and Elizabeth had concocted. I blinked in surprise as the thought flitted through my mind.

My motley crew might be a far cry from your typical heroes, but we had done it.

“Hey, you okay?” Riker’s deep voice brought me back to the present as I noticed him standing in a corner, where he’d been speaking quietly to Niko. That was odd. Those two didn’t usually get along too well, like oil and water—or vampires and sunlight. I felt a little uneasy.

I tried to sound nonchalant. “Just taking it all in, you know?”

They continued their hushed conversation, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was up between them. I hoped that whatever was going wouldn’t come back to haunt us. With our track record, though, I couldn’t be too sure.

A moment later, Riker’s strong hand gripped my shoulder, jolting me out of my thoughts. “Niko and I will take care of the bodies,” he said in a low voice. “You should get Elijah and Helen home.”

“Are you sure?” Their sudden cooperation discomfited me.

“Yeah, we got this,” Riker assured me, giving my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. I noticed Niko nodding in agreement, though his expression remained unreadable.

I nodded and turned to look for Helen and Elijah. My gaze caught on the mysterious statue that had been at the center of all this chaos.

“Let’s go, y’all,” I called out to Helen and Elijah, who stood near the exit, their faces pale and drawn. They both nodded, wordlessly following my lead as I stepped over the debris that littered the floor.

As we made our way toward the exit, I glanced back at Riker and Niko. They exchanged a few more hushed words before getting to work, their movements efficient and deliberate. Whatever they had discussed, it seemed like they’d reached an understanding.

For now, at least.

I shook my head, pushing the thought away. There would be time for questions later. Right now, my priority was getting my friends home safe and sound.

“Hey, look at us, saving the world and stuff,” Elijah said, the hint of a smile playing on his lips. “Not bad for a bunch of misfits, huh?”

“Definitely not bad,” I agreed.

Helen took one last look around the room. “I don’t think I ever want to see this place again.”

“Me neither,” I muttered under my breath. “Let’s get out of here.”

The elevator ride to the bottom was silent.

The night air was a welcome relief as we stepped outside. Helen clutched the statue to her chest.

“Next time we save the world,” Elijah muttered as we reached the car, “I’m definitely asking for a raise.”

“Yeah—good luck with that,” I said with a weary smile. And with that, we piled into the car, leaving the remnants of danger and secrets behind us—for the time being, anyway.

Once inside, I started the engine, the familiar purr momentarily drowning out my racing thoughts. Helen took a



deep breath, her grip on the statue never faltering as she turned her glittering gaze toward me.

“Are you okay? With everything that happened... Oliver’s betrayal?” she asked.

I hesitated, gripping the steering wheel tighter as memories of my ex-husband flashed through my mind. Despite his treachery, a part of me still struggled to reconcile the man I once knew with the monster he’d become.

I hesitated, examining my own feelings. Was I okay? Oliver’s betrayal still stung, but somehow, I felt a strange sense of calm. “Weirdly, I feel fine,” I confessed. “But I think I might be in shock.”

“Shock is normal,” Elijah offered. “You’ve been through a lot lately, especially with Oliver.”

“Tell me about it.”

Helen’s fingers absently traced the statue’s intricate engravings. “So...what do you make of Riker and Niko’s sudden camaraderie?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I mused, casting a glance at the rearview mirror, as if they might somehow still be visible. “But for now, I think we should just focus on getting home and recovering from this mess.”

“I could sleep for a week,” Elijah said, slumping back into his seat with a groan.

“Me too,” Helen added. “But we have another problem to deal with.”

“Like this statue thing?” Elijah asked, nodding toward the object cradled in Helen’s arms. “What are we going to do with it?”

“Good question.” I met his gaze in the rearview mirror. “I honestly don’t know yet. But one thing’s for sure: no one in the supernatural community should have it.”

“Yeah,” Elijah said, his expression serious. “This thing has caused enough trouble already.”

“Definitely,” Helen said, her fingers tightening around the statue. “But where can we keep it safe?”

“Somewhere it won’t fall into the wrong hands,” I mused, my thoughts racing as I weighed our options. “And preferably somewhere far away from me and my knack for attracting trouble.”

“Ha! That’s an understatement,” Elijah said, a playful grin crossing his face despite the situation. “Tessa Fury, supernatural trouble magnet extraordinaire.”

“Hey, I never asked for that title,” I protested, laughing despite myself.

“True.” Helen’s laughter. “But we’ll be here to help you deal with the mayhem.”

They were two constants in my ever-changing life. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Probably still chasing monsters and kicking ass,” Elijah suggested. “Just maybe with a little more chaos.”

“Sounds about right,” I conceded, smiling as I pulled away from Reunion Tower.

We were silent for a long time.

Helen’s eyes, framed by her perfectly applied makeup, narrowed thoughtfully as she clutched the statue. “What about humans? Should they have this thing?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea either.” I shook my head, trying not to imagine the chaos that could ensue if someone with no knowledge of the supernatural world got their hands on it. “It’s just too dangerous.”

“Then we need to find a place where neither humans nor supernaturals can get to it,” Elijah said.

“Sounds like a plan.” I checked the street for any signs of danger as we pulled up to the office.

“Let’s talk about it inside.” Helen suggested, and we all nodded in agreement.

They headed inside, still talking.

I locked the car and followed Helen and Elijah inside the office. They paused, turning back to face me. In the dim light of the room, I noticed how much they both looked like warriors returning from battle—Helen, with her fierce eyes and unwavering confidence; Elijah, loyal and steadfast despite his laid-back demeanor.

“Listen,” Helen said. “We’ve been thinking, and we believe you’re the best person who could possibly keep this statue safe.”

“Me?” I raised an eyebrow, feeling a mix of surprise and uncertainty. Did I want that responsibility?

“Definitely,” Elijah said.

“Besides,” Helen added, her lips twisting into a playful smile, “if anyone can keep a supernatural artifact safe from harm, it’s the woman who managed to turn her own life into a paranormal action-movie.”

“Hey!” I objected.

But I couldn’t help smiling back at them.

“Okay, fine,” I relented, extending my hand to accept the statue. “I’ll do my best to keep this thing safe.”

“We know you will,” Helen said softly.

I hesitated for a moment, staring at the ancient statue that had caused so much trouble. Then I reached out and took it.

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AS I PULLED AWAY FROM THE OFFICE AND HEADED HOME HALF an hour later, the hum of the engine seemed to echo my racing thoughts.

*What the hell am I going to do with this thing?*

I drove through Dallas, my mind racing with possibilities. Burying it somewhere remote might work, but who knows what kind of supernatural beings could stumble upon it? Locking it up in a safe seemed like a decent idea, but then

again, my own home had been broken into by creatures that shouldn't exist.

“Great,” I muttered under my breath, gripping the steering wheel tightly. “Just what I needed—another supernatural problem to solve.”

I couldn't shake the feeling that the statue held more power than anyone realized.

It was as if the very air around it vibrated with untapped energy, daring me to unravel its secrets.

But what could be done with such power—and more importantly, should it even be used?

“Ugh,” I groaned, turning up the radio to drown out my own thoughts. “Why does everything have to be so complicated?”

The drive home felt like an eternity, my thoughts a whirlwind. When I finally pulled into the driveway, the sight of my apartment building brought a small sense of relief. At least for now, I was safe.

“Okay,” I sighed as I carried the statue inside, carefully placing it on the dining table. “Time to figure this out.”

I stared at the ancient artifact, feeling a strange mix of awe and unease. It held the potential to change everything—but in whose hands would that power be safe?

*Guess it's up to me to find out, I thought.*

*And if there's one thing I'm good at, it's solving supernatural problems.*

Okay. So that was a lie.

But it was the necessary kind of lie.

And with that necessary lie, I began researching, planning, and preparing.

Because sometimes, even a reluctant hero has no choice but to embrace her destiny...and so does a reluctant bounty hunter, even if she knows she's no hero.

## EPILOGUE



**A** week later, the four of us—me, Elijah, Helen, and Riker—gathered at a local bar called The Howling Coyote. It was one of those dimly lit joints where the air smelled like a mix of alcohol, sweat, and magic.

The place was packed with all sorts of supernatural beings; a werewolf bartender with tattoos covering his arms, a water nymph chatting up a group of witches by the jukebox, and even a couple of goblins playing pool in the corner.

I felt a little proud as we toasted to our victory over Oliver and Elizabeth.

Riker leaned in. “So, the police are officially writing off Oliver and Elizabeth’s deaths as casualties in an inter-clan vampire war.” His intense gaze swept over each of us, making sure we understood the gravity of the situation. “And as far as they’re concerned, we had nothing to do with it.”

I took a swig of my beer. “That’s one less thing we have to worry about.”

“Damn right,” Helen cheered, clinking her martini glass against mine. Her makeup was flawless as always, and she’d chosen a sparkling turquoise dress that made her look like a mermaid queen. “We did what we had to do, and now it’s time to celebrate.”

Elijah, who was sitting next to me, let out a chuckle. “You just want an excuse to get drunk and dance on the tables again.”

“You know you love it.” Helen winked at him, and they shared a laugh. I smiled at their happiness.

*Riker's right, though*, I thought. This wasn't something to take lightly.

In the back of my mind, I knew that our actions would have consequences.

But for now, I pushed those thoughts aside. We were alive, Oliver and Elizabeth were gone, and we deserved a night to celebrate and let loose.

"To new beginnings," I said, raising my glass, "and to our successful bounty hunting business."

"Cheers!" Everyone clinked their glasses together.

The night was young, and we had earned this moment of respite.

Still, my fingers tapped restlessly against the side of my glass, trying to drown out the nagging disappointment that I hadn't managed to snag Oliver's bounty. It was a sore spot, for sure.

But even worse, as I stared into the swirling amber liquid in my glass, I couldn't shake the melancholy that Oliver had never been the man I thought he was when we got married. And after he became a vampire? Forget it. He was a stranger wrapped up in memories that no longer felt like mine.

"Hey Tessa!" Elijah called, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Let's lighten things up, yeah? You remember that time we tried to track down that Lake Worth Monster?"

I groaned, recalling the absurdity of our little adventure. "Oh, God. The infamous half-man, half-goat with fur and scales. How could I forget?"

"You went after that myth?" Riker asked, incredulous.

"You tell the story, Tessa," Helen said, leaning back in her chair, eager for a good laugh. "Elijah's version is always so... embellished."

"Fine," I said, putting on my best storyteller's voice. "So there we were, south of Ft. Worth, armed with nothing but rumors and a sketchy map scribbled on a napkin."

“Hey, I worked hard on that map!” Elijah interjected, feigning offense.

“Right,” I rolled my eyes. “Anyway, we’d been trekking through the woods for what seemed like hours, following what we thought were monster tracks—but turned out to be some very lost raccoons.”

“Never underestimate the power of raccoons,” Helen added solemnly, before bursting into laughter.

“True,” I continued, chuckling. “But then suddenly, we stumbled upon... the monster’s lair!”

“Or so we thought,” Elijah said. “Turns out, it was just an abandoned shed with some very enthusiastic squirrels.”

“Hey, those squirrels were terrifying!” Helen defended, placing a hand dramatically over her heart. “I thought my hair would never recover from the fright!”

“Okay, but the best part,” I said, catching my breath, “was when we finally caught a glimpse of the so-called Lake Worth Monster.”

“Ah, yes,” Elijah sighed dreamily. “The majestic beast in all its glory.”

“Or rather, a confused goat that had gotten itself tangled up in some fishing nets,” I corrected, grinning. “Poor thing looked more scared than any of us.”

Despite the lingering bitterness about Oliver, this moment reminded me of who I was—a bounty hunter with a penchant for wild adventures and even wilder friends. The warm glow of the dimly lit Howling Coyote wrapped around me like a comforting hug as I basked in the camaraderie. Riker’s booming laughter filled the air, his face crinkling with mirth as we recounted our misadventures. In that moment, all the bitterness about Oliver seemed to melt away, replaced by a sense of belonging and purpose.

“Seriously,” Riker chortled, wiping tears from his eyes, “that goat’s gonna haunt my nightmares!” He threw his head back, his muscular frame shaking with laughter.

“Nightmares? You mean dreams, right?” Helen teased, nudging him playfully. “You know you secretly wanted to adopt it as your supernatural sidekick.”

“Guilty as charged.” Riker raised his hands in surrender.

“Still counts as a capture, if you ask me,” Helen declared, raising her glass in a mock toast. “To the fearless supernatural hunters!”

“Okay, okay,” Elijah said, grinning. “Let’s not get carried away—”

He was cut off by the creak of the bar’s door. Niko Savas strode in with an air of quiet confidence. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of him; he was dressed casually, but damn—power radiated from his very being.

Riker’s laughter died down abruptly as he noticed Niko, his jaw setting in a mixture of surprise and annoyance. “Who invited him?” he demanded.

“Niko’s just here to—” I began, slightly taken aback by his sudden change in demeanor.

“Crash your little party?” Niko finished for me, a wry smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He approached our table with casual grace, his wolfish gaze never leaving mine.

“Something like that.” I tried to maintain a light tone despite the sudden tension in the air. “You’re always welcome, Niko.”

“Am I?” he asked, raising an eyebrow at Riker, who responded with a glare—but then nodded.

“Of course,” I insisted, putting on my most diplomatic smile. It was strange, seeing these two men—so different, yet both drawn to me for reasons I couldn’t quite fathom—at odds like this. I felt a responsibility to keep the peace, but also a small thrill at having captured their attention.

“Okay then,” Niko said, accepting my word with a nod. “I’ll just grab us another round of drinks and join you.”

With that, he sauntered off to the bar, leaving behind a thick cloud of unsaid words and lingering stares. Riker’s eyes bored



into me as if questioning my loyalties, but I wasn't about to let him dictate who I could or couldn't be friends with.

"Let's not make this into something it's not," I said gently, placing a hand on Riker's forearm, "We're all here to celebrate, remember?"

"Fine," he grumbled, his muscles tensing beneath my touch. As I looked into his dark eyes, I knew that this wasn't the end of it, but I could tell he was making an effort—for now, at least.

Niko returned with drinks, and Helen and Elijah continued telling monster-hunting misadventure stories. As the laughter died down, Niko reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out several envelopes, each neatly sealed and labeled with our names. "I hired Tessa for this job," he began, waving the envelopes in the air for emphasis, "and you all worked with her, so you deserve a share of the reward."

"Checks?" Helen raised an eyebrow, a grin tugging at the corners of her mouth as she accepted her envelope. "How delightfully old-fashioned."

"Thank you, Niko," Elijah said, taking his own envelope and giving it a little shake, as though he were trying to guess its contents.

My eyes flicked to Riker, who hesitated before accepting his envelope, his pride evident in the set of his square jaw. "I didn't do this for the money," he muttered, but Niko cut him off with a dismissive wave.

"Take it, Riker," Niko insisted. "You earned it. And Tessa could've used your help if things had gone south."

"Fine." Riker reluctantly accepted the check, tucking it away without another word.

"Cheers to that!" I said, raising my glass in a toast. The others followed suit, clinking their glasses together in a cacophony of celebration.

Once the checks had been distributed, Niko drained the last of his drink in one swift motion and stood up, signaling his intent to leave.

But then he leaned in toward me.

“Hey,” Niko murmured, his breath warm against my ear. “You should keep the statue in a safety deposit box.”

Before I could process his words, his lips met mine in a brief, tender kiss. As he pulled away, I caught a glimpse of Riker across the table, his eyes narrowed and jaw clenched. The air around us seemed to thicken with tension, making it difficult to breathe.

“Thanks for the advice,” I whispered back, feeling heat rise to my cheeks. I couldn’t let myself get caught up in whatever was brewing between Riker, Niko, and me. This wasn’t some trashy romance novel; I had more important things to focus on—like hunting supernatural monsters and improving my skills as a bounty hunter.

If I were to be honest with myself, getting involved with either man would only complicate matters further.

“Anytime.” Niko offered me a small smile before he turned to leave the bar. His departure was abrupt, leaving me conflicted, my thoughts whirling like a Texas tornado, trying to make sense of the emotions that threatened to consume me—gratitude for his generosity, curiosity about his intentions, and uneasiness about what the future might hold.

“Are you okay?” Riker asked as he studied my face.

I forced a smile. “Just...thinking.”

“About what?”

“Change,” I said, my gaze still fixed on the now-empty chair where Niko had sat. “And power.”

“Ah, two of life’s most unpredictable forces,” Riker mused, leaning back in his seat and giving me an understanding nod. “But sometimes, it’s the uncertainty that makes things interesting.”

*Interesting* was certainly one way to describe the whirlwind of emotions I was experiencing—a thrilling, terrifying mix of anticipation and anxiety as I contemplated the choices before me.

“Here’s to change, then,” I murmured, taking a sip of my drink. “May it lead us to even greater hunts and victories.”

“Cheers to that,” Riker said, raising his glass once more. The others joined in, their laughter and conversation rising like a tide around me, sweeping me back into the embrace of friendship and shared purpose.

For now, that was enough.

A moment later, Riker got up to order more drinks.

“Are you okay?” Helen asked me as soon as he was gone.

I sighed, forcing a weak grin onto my face. “Yeah, just... thinking.”

“About what?” Elijah asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Love triangles.” I rolled my eyes at the absurdity of it all. “Or, more specifically, how I won’t be caught in one.”

“Good plan,” Helen said, nodding sagely. “Nothing good ever comes from love triangles. Trust me, I’ve been there.”

“Here’s to finding another man entirely,” I declared, lifting my glass and clinking it against Helen’s and Elijah’s. They laughed, but I knew that my decision wasn’t a joke. I needed to focus on my career and the supernatural world that was constantly evolving around me.

“May he be human,” Elijah added, grinning cheekily.

“Or at least less complicated than those two,” Helen said, earning a chuckle from us all.

As we continued to share stories and laughter late into the night, I let my mind wander back to Riker’s intense gaze and Niko’s whispered advice.

Change was inevitable, and power came in many forms. But one thing was certain: I wouldn’t let myself become ensnared in a love triangle that could jeopardize everything I’d worked for.

*Here’s to a future filled with adventure, not romantic complications,* I thought, taking a sip of my drink.

For now, that would have to be enough.

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THE DIM GLOW OF THE NEON SIGN ABOVE THE HOWLING Coyote cast a surreal light onto the pavement as Riker and I made our way outside.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Riker said as he walked me to my car, his voice taking on a serious tone that seemed out of place given the evening’s revelry, “where’s the statue?”

I stopped in my tracks, my hand poised on the door handle of my car and looked him straight in the eye. “I can’t tell you,” I said firmly. “I don’t think anyone should have access to it.”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Okay, Tessa. Just be careful, okay?”

“Of course,” I assured him, offering a small smile before climbing into the driver’s seat. As I pulled away from the curb and began to navigate the dark, deserted streets toward my apartment, my thoughts wandered back to Niko’s advice earlier in the evening.

He was right; I really should move the all-powerful statue, the one that could control supernaturals, out from under my bed and into a more secure location. It was dangerous to keep such an artifact within my own home.

“Tomorrow,” I vowed silently, gripping the steering wheel tightly as I made the decision. “I’ll find a safety deposit box and put the statue there. No more hiding it under my bed like some kind of supernatural security blanket.”

The thought brought a wry smile to my lips, despite the seriousness of the situation.

“Here’s to a future filled with adventure,” I whispered into the darkness, repeating my earlier wish. “And a love life that doesn’t involve any supernatural triangles.”

With that, I turned up the volume on the radio, letting the music drown out any lingering worries that threatened to creep

in.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Times* bestselling author Margo Bond Collins is a former college English professor who, tired of explaining the difference between “hanged” and “hung,” turned to writing romance novels instead. (Sometimes her heroines kill monsters too.)

Want to hang out with the author, win book prizes, see the cool covers first, and support Margo’s books on social media? Join [The Vampirarchy](#), Margo’s street team on Facebook. And you find all her social media links on her website: [www.MargoBondCollins.net](http://www.MargoBondCollins.net)

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