



# FIENDISH FURY

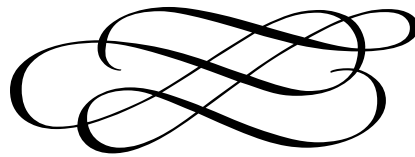
TESSA FURY,  
ACCIDENTAL BOUNTY HUNTER - ONE

NY TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
MARGO BOND COLLINS

# FIENDISH FURY

TESSA FURY, ACCIDENTAL BOUNTY HUNTER

BOOK ONE



MARGO BOND COLLINS

# CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

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# INTRODUCTION

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Fiendish Fury: Tessa Fury, Accidental Bounty Hunter Book 1  
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# ABOUT FIENDISH FURY

**Meet Tessa Fury: accidental bounty hunter of all things supernatural, dangerous, and outside the law.**

Twelve years ago, the supernatural world revealed itself to the rest of us. Vampires, werewolves, fairies—all real.

Twelve days ago, I accidentally took a job as a supernatural bounty hunter tracking down the worst of the things that go bump in the night.

Twelve hours ago, I turned in my first paranormal fugitive.

And twelve minutes ago, I'm pretty sure I died.

I had absolutely zero plans to become a monster hunter.

I got okey-doked into it. You know—those times when a friend is outlining a plan for the day and you're just going along with it like an idiot, saying yes to everything...right up to the moment you realize you've just said "okey-doke" to going after a feral werewolf with nothing but a butcher knife and a Tootsie Pop in your pocket.

If I survive this werewolf hunt, I'm changing jobs.

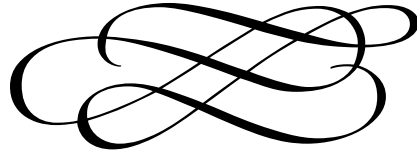
Maybe.

It just pays so damn much...

If I catch the bad guys.

And assuming I live.

# CHAPTER 1



**T**welve years ago, the supernatural world revealed itself to the rest of us. Vampires, werewolves, fairies—all real.

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My name is Tessa Fury, and I am an accidental bounty hunter of all things supernatural, dangerous, and outside the law.

My pale skin, ability to hold my drink, and last name come from my Irish father, and my dark eyes and generally sassy attitude come from my Mexican mother. My purple hair comes from a bottle on a shelf at Walmart, and the tattoo of an anchor just above my right boob came from a week-long Vegas bender with a sailor whose name I pretend not to remember even though it ended in a real wedding and a short-lived, mostly fake marriage.

That's pretty much the story of my life: do something that seems fun at the time, then spend the next six months—or longer—untangling the mess it made.

So when I came home to Dallas from Vegas, divorce decree in hand—along with the college diploma I'd spent the past four years in California earning—my parents pretty much rolled their eyes and gave me my old bedroom.

That lasted all of about five weeks before Mama started hounding me to find work. Halloween afternoon, I escaped to my friend Elijah's apartment to discuss our nonexistent job prospects while he smoked a joint.

"Seriously, Tess, check out this website." He squinted at me through the smoke that filled the room, inhaling as he spoke. "It's got all the most-wanted supernaturals in the system just listed, along with the bounties on them." He waved the joint toward me, offering me a hit.

I shook my head. Marijuana makes me stupid—and even then, I knew I ought to keep my wits about me for this conversation. "Dude. I just finished a degree in Art History. I don't know anything about tracking supernaturals."

"That's the best part," he insisted, his blondish-brown hair flopping down into his eyes before he brushed it back as he peered at the screen. "You don't need skills. Just determination. All we have to do is get the perp to the nearest police station and we get paid."

“The perp? Seriously? Have you been bingeing cop shows again?” I dug through the bowl of candy Elijah had placed on a chair by the door in preparation for the inevitable trick-or-treaters destined to show up that evening. Most of the candy was gone, a victim of Elijah’s munchies, leaving only wrappers fluttering in the breeze from the A/C.

October in Texas—it was still almost ninety degrees outside, but Elijah’s apartment was around seventy, ERCOT’s requests for us to lower our electricity consumption be damned.

“How hard can it be, really?” he persisted.

“Don’t the hunters have to be paid by the bail bondsman or something?” I vaguely remember that from watching a bounty hunter reality show on TV years ago.

“No, dude,” Elijah said. “Look. It’s different for supernaturals.” He tapped the screen of his laptop. “Says here that after all the paranormal types decided to come out into the open, nobody was willing to put up bail for them. Not until a bunch of them got together and started a nationwide program. Now it works just like any other bail bondsman, except if you’re the paranormal, you have to go through their program.”

“That tells me what works for supernatural criminals.” I threw myself down on the couch next to him and leaned over to peer at the screen. “Since when are bounties like that just open to the public?”

“Since all the regular bounty hunters turned them down—said they didn’t want to go after vampires and shit, not unless they were going to get paid a lot more money. And because that wasn’t about to happen, this paranormal bail bonds co-op needed to find people to do it for that same price.”

“It doesn’t pay more. Then why can’t we just go after humans?”

“Because for those bond jumpers, you do need to get hired by a bail bond company. And to get hired, you have to have qualifications. Sucks, huh?”

Qualifications. The bane of my current existence.

Elijah’s too.

He couldn't keep a job; I couldn't get one.

Elijah had been through seven jobs in the six months since I'd gotten home from college. He'd been fired for getting stoned at work, for showing up stoned to work, and for getting stoned and forgetting to go to work at all.

That wasn't my problem.

I was overqualified for the kinds of jobs I might otherwise be likely to get—apparently my art history degree from a fancy college meant I was overqualified for most entry-level jobs but underqualified for the kinds of jobs that hired people with degrees.

As one potential employer had told me, I had “zero real-world skills, and a degree that was utterly useless.”

Elijah flipped back over to the page he'd been examining. “Look at this one. A werewolf, right here in Dallas, with a fifty-thousand-dollar bounty. Fifty thousand! We could live for a year on that.”

I pulled a Tootsie Pop out of the bottom of the candy bowl, unwrapped it to pop it into my mouth, and moved across the room to peer at the screen over his shoulder. “Fifty thousand? Seriously?”

Maybe this idea wasn't as awful as I had first thought...

I spent the next two days watching the news as every local station in the entire Dallas-Fort Worth area covered the fugitive werewolf and the enormous bounty.

Talking heads came on-screen to discuss what a terrible idea was to make the bounty public.

Professional bounty hunters gave interviews explaining why everyday citizens were no match for werewolves.

Local police officers went onto shows and talked about the problem inherent

in the bounty hunting system in general.

Even a couple of local werewolf pack alphas—the few who were willing to expose their identities publicly—joined newscasts live to urge people not to go after this guy.

Of course, all the stations carried the basic information about his crime.

Niko Savas, a one-time wealthy businessman who, as it turned out, was also a werewolf, had been out on bail, charged with having murdered his ex-wife and her new husband—supposedly the same man who had changed Niko into a wolf shifter.

The news shows all flashed crime-scene photos of the bloody kitchen where the two had been found, either to horrify viewers or to remind us Niko was dangerous—or maybe both.

And every single newscast ended with a reiteration of that \$50,000 bounty.

By the time I'd watched all the newscasts, I *knew* it was a stupid idea to go after this dickhead.

I also knew I was going to do my very best to grab that bounty.

So on November 3, I gave Elijah a call. “Okay,” I said. “I’m in.”

“For what?” Elijah asked, clearly already having started the day’s weed consumption.

“Bounty hunting.”

“Oh, shit, Tess. Haven’t you seen the news? That dude’s dangerous.”

My jaw clenched, and I bit back a curse. I should’ve known better. This had been the pattern our entire lives. Even before he had picked up smoking weed as his primary recreational activity, Elijah had been a master at pulling me into his latest schemes and then abandoning me.

“So,” Elijah began slowly, drawing out the word, “what would we have to do to claim the reward?”

“It’s not a reward,” I told him for at least the third time since the first time he’d mentioned it to me. “It’s a bounty. This werewolf guy was arrested for

doing some kind of bad something—”

No need to remind Elijah of what that bad thing was, right?

“And some idiot bail bondsman put up the bail for him. When the werewolf guy didn’t show up to court, the guy lost all that money.”

“Which guy?” Elijah asked.

“The bail bondsman.”

“Not the werewolf?”

I ran my hand over my face. “I don’t know, Elijah. I’m guessing he lost some money too. But I meant the bail bondsman. Whatever money he put up for the werewolf to get out of jail, the bail bondsman lost it when the werewolf dude failed to show up for court.”

“Got it. So what do we need to do to get this money?” Elijah asked.

“First we have to register as official bounty hunters.”

That hadn’t always been the case. In fact, it used to be that to become a bounty hunter, all you had to do was get hired by a bail bondsman to track down a bail jumper. The rules had been decided in a Supreme Court case and everything, back in the late 1800s.

Yeah, I’d spent way too much time researching this instead of looking for a real job.

“What does it take to register?” Elijah asked.

“Apparently, there have been so many people signing up that they’ve opened a temporary office in the courthouse annex.”

“Don’t you have to be trained or something?”

“Nope. That’s the beauty of this.”

Assuming the word *beauty* could be used to describe hunting down a criminal for a reward.

*No. For a bounty*, I corrected myself.

I needed to be careful around Elijah—he had the most amazing ability to get me all turned around every time I talked to him.

“Once we register,” I continued, “we can ask them to give us the information on all the supernatural bail jumpers in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and we can use it to track this guy down and catch him.”

I could hear Elijah’s brain ticking over, albeit more slowly than usual, as he worked through all the implications. “They give the same information to everybody, right?”

“Right.”

“So what makes you think our chances of catching him are any better than anyone else’s?”

Now, finally, I had an answer that was different from anyone else’s. “Because my Uncle Carlos has connections,” I said triumphantly. “And what Carlos doesn’t have, Uncle Tommy does.”

Between the two sides of my family—the Hispanics from my mom’s side and the Irish from my dad’s—I had links to pretty much all the cops *and* all the criminals in the entire DFW Metroplex.

But not in any stereotypical way. My mother’s Mexican brothers were all cops. My dad’s Irish cousins were all criminals.

If we used all those contacts, I was pretty sure Elijah and I could track down Niko Savas.

“Anyway, you’re the only reason I’m even considering this, Elijah,” I finally said. “So get up off your ass, take a shower, and come downtown with me where we’ll register our new bounty-hunting business. That way we can get the money if we manage to capture this guy.”

“If I go with you, will you give me half the money?”

I heaved a sigh. “Yeah. But only if you actually help me catch Niko Savas.”

“Okay, then,” he said. “Pick me up in half an hour.”

After I hung up on my always-stoned best friend, I moved to my closet.

What was I supposed to wear to sign up for a bounty hunter job?

Most of the bounty hunters I had seen on television were men, and at least for their interviews, they dressed like badasses in leather pants and jackets, riding motorcycles, and generally sporting big bushy beards.

I checked my face in the mirror and then pulled a strand of my long wavy dark hair around to cover my upper lip.

*I look like my Uncle Julio.*

Nope. A beard would never do for me.

And unless I got that \$50,000, nobody was going to sell me a motorcycle.

So I'd have to do with my twelve-year-old gray Kia hatchback for transportation and continue wearing my usual jeans and T-shirt.

I started to pull on a pair of high-heeled black boots, but then it occurred to me that bounty hunting might involve some running.

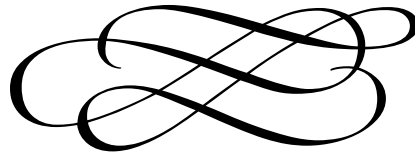
*Yuck. Running.*

Was I really sure I wanted to do this?

No. I wasn't.

But I definitely wanted that \$50,000.

## CHAPTER 2



**A**t the Dallas County Clerk's Office, a line snaked out the door and into the marble-floored hallway.

Apparently, it used to be even easier to become a bounty hunter. But ever since the paranormals had, as some old TV show used to say about vampires, "come out of the coffin," the police and community had been trying to find ways to register and track not only the supernaturals themselves, but also the people they harmed.

Tracking them directly was a little too difficult to enforce—it smacked of totalitarian regimes, according to the opponents of those measures. But forcing the people who hunted down the rogue supernaturals to register? That was just good sense, according to some of those same people.

In any case, it was still easy to become a bounty hunter of humans.

But hunting supernatural bounty jumpers required a special business license.

As we moved toward the front of the line, Elijah glanced around us at all the signs. "You didn't tell me this was going to cost money," he hissed at me.

I frowned. "It's only \$30."

"I don't have \$30."

I rolled my eyes. "You spent it on weed, didn't you?"



“Hush. You’re going to get me arrested.”

I shook my head. Texas was still one of the only states in the US where marijuana remained illegal. But even Elijah had to know that the Dallas DA had been refusing to prosecute marijuana arrests for years. Especially after the supernaturals came out. She had bigger things to worry about than twenty-somethings getting stoned with their THC-gummy-eating grandmothers who were trying to ward off the aches and pains of advancing age.

But Elijah often got paranoid when he got stoned, so I let it pass without comment.

At the front of line, a uniformed officer probably in his mid-fifties or so said, “IDs,” in a bored tone without looking up.

We fished them out of our wallets and handed them over. He glanced down at the cards, then up at us.

“Jesus Christ. More kids,” he muttered. “Are you sure you two want to do this?”

I squared my shoulders as I read his name tag. “Absolutely, Officer Callahan,” I said.

He heaved a huge sigh. “You registering under the same company name?”

“Yes,” I said firmly at the same moment Elijah said, “No.”

I punched Elijah in the leg with one fist held down by my side. “Yes, we are,” I said. “Fury Bounties.”

“You incorporated?”

“Um... no?”

He glanced up again, and this time, his blue eyes crinkled in a smile. “You don’t sound too sure about that.”

“I’m not sure how that would happen,” I admitted.

He nodded. “You’d know it if you’d done it. So I’ll put you down as simply a DBA—a ‘Doing Business As’ certificate.”

“Sounds good.”

He finished filling out the paperwork. “You have an office address?”

“Do we need one?” Elijah asked.

“Nope. A home address will do.”

I wasn’t about to put my parents’ home address down as the place of business for Fury Bounties. So instead, I rattled off Elijah’s address and apartment number.

A few seconds later, Officer Callahan printed out paperwork and took it over to another desk, where a different officer stamped and signed it.

Callahan came back and handed the paper to me. “Keep that in a safe place,” he said as I folded in half and shoved it into my purse.

Reaching under a counter, he pulled out a packet of information, already printed. “Here you do--all the information on the current bounties up for grabs.” He paused, then made careful eye contact with me. “Be careful out there,” he said, his tone suddenly more earnest than it had been before. “These guys are dangerous. Especially the one everyone is after right now. That bounty isn’t worth your life.”

I nodded. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

We turned away from the counter and headed toward the door as the people behind us moved up to the front of the line.

I glanced back once as we headed outside and discovered the officer was still watching us, shaking his head.

Maybe I really was making a mistake.

In the car, I flipped through the paperwork Officer Callahan had given us handing each page to Elijah as I finished staring at it.

“Look at this one,” Elijah said, pulling a sheet of paper out from the sheaf and sliding it back over to me from the passenger sheet.

It was Niko Savas’s mug shot.

Even there, he was a gorgeous man. Dark hair, a five-o’clock shadow that made me want to run my hand across his cheek, heavy dark brows, and brown eyes that stared intensely at the camera, as if daring the viewer to come after him.

It was the same image that had been plastered all over television.

“Nothing here I haven’t seen on the news,” I murmured.

“Think maybe we should go talk to your Uncle Carlos?”

Suspicious of his too-innocent tone, I glanced over at Elijah who was staring down at the papers I’d handed him, his brow furrowed.

Well, he wasn’t wrong.

“I guess so,” I said reluctantly. “I can’t imagine he’s going to think this is a good idea, though.”

Still, Carlos had always supported me in everything I did, so I was better off talking to him about it than anyone else in my family, at least for the moment. Eventually, I’d probably have to try to get information out of my Uncle Tommy too. Tommy would give me whatever details he had, but only after he gave me a hard time and told me not to get mixed up in his world—just like he always did.

But he’d hold something back.

Carlos, on the other hand, would tease me a little, but he’d give me the whole story.

So, yeah.

First stop: Uncle Carlos.

“Uncle Carlos?” I used my key to open the door to his apartment, knocking as I entered. “Hello? Uncle Carlos?”

“In the living room, Tessa.”

From behind me, Elijah whispered, “I don’t think I should be here.”

“What? Why not? Of course you should.”

“I have weed in my pocket,” Elijah hissed.

“I have THC gummies in my dresser,” Carlos announced, following it up with a snicker. “Nothing wrong with my hearing, son.”

In my uncle’s living room, I stepped over to his wheelchair and dropped down to give him a kiss on his cheek. “You probably shouldn’t announce that,” I reminded him. “It might get you in trouble.”

“What are they gonna do? Take away my legs?”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head, but I laughed as I did it.

Carlos lived on a disability pension from the Dallas Police Department, one he had begun receiving seven years earlier after he’d been shot in the spine during a robbery call back when he was on the police force.

No one in the Dallas PD was going to cause him any trouble. He was a local hero as far as they were concerned. He could probably smoke out in the middle of the station, and they’d just bring him back home.

“Get yourselves something to drink,” Carlos instructed me pointing toward the refrigerator in the kitchenette off to the side.

I pulled out a couple of diet Cokes, handing one to Elijah and waving the second at Carlos. “Want one?”

“No thanks. I’m still working on mine.”

I closed the fridge door and moved to sit on the couch next to Elijah who still

looked anxious.

“Did your mother send you over here to check on me?” Carlos asked as I popped the tab on the drink and took a swig.

“No,” I said, swallowing. “Elijah and I are here because we have some questions about the Niko Savas case.”

“Aw, shit, *chica*. Don’t tell me you’re joining in that craziness.”

I shrugged. “It’s fifty thousand dollars, *tio*. That could really get me set up. I could move out of my parents’ house, start a real life.”

“All life is real, sweetheart. It doesn’t matter where you live or what you’re doing, as long as you’re happy.”

“Yeah, well, fifty thousand would go a long way toward making me happy.”

He shook his head, rearranging the blanket he wore over his mostly useless limbs. “It’s a dangerous job, *mija*. Believe me, I should know.”

“I don’t know if we can do this,” I told him. “But we’re going to try. I’d love it if you helped me.”

Carlos heaved a sigh. “There’s not a whole lot I could tell you that isn’t already in your little packet there.” He gestured at the papers in my hand.

“Not a whole lot? Does that mean there’s something?” I knew Carlos still had plenty of contacts in the Dallas Police Department. His old partner still came by regularly as did some of the other cops he’d worked with. I’d been around them enough to know that they gossiped about department business. “You do know something, don’t you? Please tell me, Uncle Carlos.”

He grinned. “You always were the sharpest one in the family. Too bad you’re not sharp enough to stay away from this entirely.”

“Well, I *am* your niece.” I winked at him. “Maybe taking down the bad guys runs in the family.”

He shook his head in mock sadness. “Why couldn’t you have taken after your father’s side of the family? There’s more money in crime, you know.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “Not if I get caught, there isn’t.”

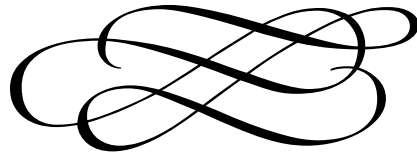
Elijah, who had been turning his head back and forth between us as if he were watching a tennis match, leaned forward. “She won’t be alone,” he offered.

Carlos’s gaze flickered to Elijah and then back to me, and I could see him biting back a smartass comment.

“Yes. At least there’s that,” he finally said.

He picked up his own diet drink from the TV tray set up next to his chair and took a long drink out of it, and then settled back in a way that I recognized as his cue that he was about to get down to business.

## CHAPTER 3



Uncle Carlos stared around his apartment. I followed his gaze, taking it in.

The walls were painted a standard apartment-complex white, and the kitchen counters, carpet, and appliances were all in varying shades of neutral—lots of beiges and whites.

His place was small, but ever since my aunt Judy had left him not long after he'd been confined to the wheelchair—much to the rest of the family's disgust—the department had arranged for a nurse to come in twice a day to check on him. And my mother and Aunt Anita, his other sister, had arranged for someone to come in once a week to clean.

All in all, Carlos was pretty self-sufficient. He could still move himself to and from his wheelchair to get around, and he liked to take short walks across the apartment using the crutches currently leaning against the wall—he wasn't totally paralyzed or anything.

Sure, he'd never be a cop again. But he was still mentally sharp, and I knew he enjoyed having his old police buddies come by to discuss their current cases—department regulations be damned.

In fact, from some things he'd let drop now and then, I suspected Carlos had been involved in cracking more than a few cases since his accident.

When he began talking, I realized that he hadn't been looking at his own apartment at all—at least, that's not what he'd been seeing in his mind's eye.

It might not be in front of him, but that razor-sharp brain of his could still see every detail of the crime scene even though he'd never been there.

“When the initial respondents arrived on the scene, they discovered two victims, both deceased.” For a moment, he slipped into what I used to tease him was his ‘cop-talk’—overly formal, phrased as if he were presenting a report to a superior. I suspected that was part of how police officers learned to distance themselves from the gruesome elements of their jobs. How they saved their sanity.

But his gaze moved back to me, and he dropped the cop-talk. “It was immediately obvious the attack hadn’t been done by anything human—not human all the time, anyway.”

Carlos picked up his phone from the wooden TV tray next to him and flipped through it until he found the pictures he was looking for. He handed the phone to me. I took one look and instantly glanced away, shuddering.

Crime scene photos.

Apparently, at least one of his old friends down at the station had been willing to share them with him.

I set my jaw and looked back at the photos, determined to see what kind of man I was chasing.

The two victims—Niko’s ex-wife and her new husband—had been mauled. Blood splattered across the bodies sprawled on a white marble floor and pooled in dark misshapen puddles obscuring some details, but I could see the five razor-sharp slices running through parts of the bodies. Just like claw marks.

No. They weren’t *like* claw marks. They *were* claw marks.

“Nobody knew Niko was a werewolf until then,” Carlos continued. “It was his big, dark secret.”

I had heard this part. “That’s when the investigation narrowed down on him, right?”

“Right. In most of these kinds of cases, the killer is someone close to the



victim. The spouse—or in this case, the ex-spouse—is the first person we look at. And Niko ran. Worst thing he could've done if he'd wanted to protest his innocence.”

Elijah held out his hand for the phone, and I passed it over to him.

“Oh, dude,” he breathed out, and handed it right back.

Uncle Carlos's eyes crinkled at my friend's reaction, but he refrained from laughing outright. Instead, he continued talking about the werewolf we were hunting. “Two years ago, Niko Savas was one of the big players in Dallas. Started off with a string of restaurants then expanded his empire. By the time he and his wife split, he'd been named Dallas Businessperson of the Year half a dozen times and had his hand in a bunch of different businesses. Forensic accountants are still untangling all the details last I heard.”

“Was he always a werewolf?” Elijah asked.

Carlos shrugged. “No one knows for sure, but my money's on no. He was just a regular guy up until a few years ago. As regular as one super rich workaholic can be, anyway.

“But according to my contacts on the force, everything changed about three years ago. Niko got rougher to work for, generally harder and meaner. Occasionally violent.

“That's around the time his wife left him too. It wouldn't surprise me if that's when he got changed. My friends on the paranormal task force tell me the first years are the hardest for a new wolf shifter. It's like their animal side takes over for a while, and all their worst instincts rise to the surface.” He reached over and took another drink of his Diet Coke.

“If that's true, though, Niko Savas got his worst impulses under control pretty fast. Six months later, he was back to normal in the office. The theory is that he channeled all those wolf instincts into the boardroom.” He paused, his gaze flickering between us. “Right up until the night he killed his ex-wife and her new husband, that is.”

“What set him off?” I asked.

“No one's entirely sure. Johnny—” Uncle Carlos's former partner, the one

who still came around to visit at least once a week, “—thinks it just got too hard for Savas to rein in his wolf side. He thinks it wasn’t any one single thing, but a whole bunch of things all piled up.”

I forced myself to glance back down the bloody pictures on the phone when my uncle gestured at it. “The general theory is that he lost control of his temper.”

I narrowed my eyes as I studied my uncle. “You don’t think that’s what happened though, do you?”

Uncle Carlos chewed on his bottom lip for a moment, then slowly shook his head. “It doesn’t make sense—not given the rest of what I’ve heard of the man. Even after he went wolf, Nikos Savas maintained iron control. He might’ve lost it once or twice, but not to the extent we’re talking here.” He gestured at the phone again.

Finally unable to stand the sight of all the blood any longer, I set the phone face down on Carlos’s TV tray.

“So it wasn’t a werewolf, then what did that?” Elijah gestured at the phone. “What else could have ripped those people apart like that?”

Carlos leaned back in his wheelchair and crossed his hands over his belly. “Don’t get me wrong. I think a werewolf did this. I just don’t think Niko Savas was that werewolf.”

“Do any of the other cops think the way you do?” I asked, a kernel of an idea beginning to form in the back of my mind.

Carlos gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Enough that the theory made its way to me. Not enough to freeze Savas. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be in the trouble he is now.”

I leaned forward clasping the opposite elbow with each hand and dropping them down to my knees as my gaze bored into my uncle. “If you were going to try to find out what really happened, where would you start?”

A small grin quirked up one corner of Carlos’s mouth. “Now you’re thinking like a detective.” The ghost of a smile disappeared almost as quickly as it had arrived, and Carlos thumped back into his chair. “But don’t go getting carried

away,” he warned me. “If I’m right, and whoever did this is still out there, they’ll be determined to make sure Niko takes the fall. I don’t want you anywhere near that.”

“Of course,” I murmured automatically, still considering what steps I might take to figure out what had really happened. After all, if Niko Savas hadn’t murdered his ex-wife and her new husband, then capturing him would mean sending an innocent man—werewolf, whatever—to prison.

To his death.

Because the state of Texas, in its inimitable wisdom, had passed a law making it a capital crime to commit murder while in a “paranormal state.”

The law hadn’t been tested yet, but somehow, I felt certain Niko Savas would be the first to fall prey to the statute.

If I could prove that he hadn’t committed the murder at the same time I captured him, I could both collect the bounty and arrange to have him set free.

I could wash both my debts and my conscience clean all at the same time.

“Where would I start?” Carlos mused. “Well, right before Savas was picked up for the murder, there were rumors of him hanging out at a local bar.”

“A werewolf bar?” Elijah asked eagerly.

I had heard of those places—full of werewolves in various states of shifting. Far too dangerous for your average, everyday human. No place I’d want to go without some serious protection—preferably in the form of a big, burly man armed with silver bullets.

But Carlos shook his head. “Nope. Not a werewolf bar.” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “Way worse than that,” he whispered. “A drag bar.”

I sat up straight, blinking, from where I had leaned forward to listen closely, not sure I’d heard him correctly. That’s what my uncle thought was worse than a werewolf bar? “A drag bar?”

“You heard me, *mija*. The kind of place where men dress up as women and put on shows.” He cackled. “That’s what stuck in my mind about it. Not that

I care what a man does in his private time as long as it isn't hurting anyone. But somehow, the idea of Niko Savas hanging out with drag queens just never quite sat right with me. Especially not after he was a werewolf. It didn't make any sense."

"You remember the name of this bar?" I asked.

"Of course I do," Carlos said, his tone outraged at the thought that I might believe he would forget an important detail like that. "It was the Miss Treatment Club. Two words—Miss Treatment. And the person to ask for once you get there is Helen Heels." He paused. "Just promise me you'll be careful."

"We will. I promise."

He narrowed his eyes. "Actually, come to think of it, I know someone who can help you. Riker Kane. He works as a bounty hunter sometimes—kind of a jack of all trades in this business."

He opened his phone and a few seconds later, a contact pinged through to mine.

"I'm sending him a text with your information too. You should meet with him before you do anything else. He'll make good backup for you if you actually find Niko Savas."

"How much does he charge?"

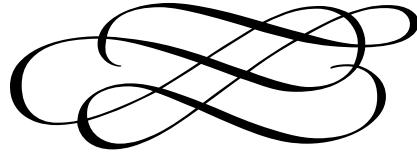
Uncle Carlos shrugged. "Gotta work that out with him. But if you're serious about doing this, you're going to need someone to back you up." His gaze flickered to Elijah as my friend made a protesting noise. "Someone with some experience."

"I'll reach out to him," I promised Uncle Carlos.

"Thank you," he said, turning his face up for my kiss as Elijah and I stood to take our leave.

"I mean it, *mija*. Don't underestimate Niko Savas."

## CHAPTER 4



Out in the car, I took a few seconds to shoot off the text to Riker Kane.

To my surprise, he responded almost immediately.

“Meet me at Café Brazil on Elm at 1:30?”

“Sounds good. See you then.”

I opened my purse and checked my wallet.

I had less than fifty dollars left to my name.

“How much cash do you have?” I asked Elijah.

He frowned, then pulled out his own wallet and rifled through the bills in it. Eighteen dollars.”

Okay. Between the two of us, we had enough to buy the four of us lunch and put gas in my car. But we were going to need more cash than that if we were going to get through the rest of the week—and probably more if we were going to check out the drag show too.

“How much is the cover for that drag show?” I asked Elijah.

He gave me a confused glance. “I have no idea. I’ve never been.”

I rolled my eyes. “Look it up, then.”

“Oh, yeah.”

I was beginning to think that while I'd been away at college, perhaps my best friend had burned out more brain cells on weed than he could realistically afford. As he slowly scrolled through his browser, I pulled out my phone and looked up the club.

"Fifteen dollars each," I said.

"Oh, dude," Elijah said. "I don't think we can afford that."

There had to be a way to get some money fast.

"Hey," I said, a thought suddenly occurring to me. "What's the name of that website with all the bounties on it?"

To my surprise, Elijah actually rattled off the website address without having to think about it. Maybe he had a few more brain cells left than I'd thought.

I pulled up the site on my phone and began scrolling through the various possibilities.

There were a few that didn't look too terrible, that should work to get us a little extra money.

We could meet Kane for lunch, then go pick up one of the bounties listed on the website. Then we'd have enough money to go to the drag show that night to talk to Helen Heels.

Before we went to Café Brazil, I looked Kane up online.

There wasn't a whole lot of information about him, but what I found was interesting enough that I called Uncle Carlos to ask a few more questions.

Kane was an ex-Marine who'd come home from several tours in the Middle East and joined the Dallas police department for a couple of years, then figured out there was more money to be made in private security. According to Uncle Carlos, Kane did skip tracing and bounty hunting when the money

was worth it.

He really was a jack of all trades—at least in the trades dealing with people who broke the law.

When we walked into Café Brazil, a local hipster diner, I recognized him from his picture online—though the only photo I’d been able to find was at least a decade old, his official Marine Corps photo.

The Kane in that picture was young, fresh-faced, with pale skin, dark hair, sparkling bright blue eyes and an eager smile.

The man who met us in Café Brazil was harder, with lines carved into his cheeks that suggested he’d lived a lot—and a lot harder—since the Marine portrait had been taken.

He wore a dark gray T-shirt stretched over chest and arm muscles that looked like they could’ve been carved out of stone.

He’d been attractive when the Marine portrait had been taken.

Now he was fucking gorgeous.

When Elijah and I arrived, he’d already ordered, and was sitting at a four-top table with a stack of pancakes and a pile of sausage in front of him.

He chewed and swallowed as we approached the table. “Cheat day,” he said, gesturing at his plate with a fork. “Riker Kane,” he introduced himself, half rising from his seat and reaching out to shake first my hand and then Elijah’s.

The man had a grip like I imagined The Rock would if he were trying to intimidate someone—though I didn’t think Kane was attempting to intimidate me. That was just his handshake.

And come to think of it, he looked a little bit like a younger, paler version of the actor.

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

Elijah and I introduced ourselves and took our seats at the table. I glanced at the menu and did some quick calculations in my head. “Toast and coffee,” I told the server when she came by. If Elijah and I were going to pay for

Kane's meal and still go to the show, I'd have to be careful what I ordered.

Kane kept eating until our food arrived. Then he pushed back his plate. "Carlos tells me you're planning to go after Niko Savas."

"That's the plan." I kept my tone neutral.

He tilted his head, his gaze narrowing as he examined the two of us. "Savas is a werewolf."

"I'm aware." Picking up my coffee cup, I took a drink.

"That means he's stronger and tougher than most humans."

I nodded, waiting for the punchline.

"I would hesitate to go up against him alone."

I crossed my arms and leaned back in my seat, pushing the saucer holding my coffee cup away from me. "That's why Carlos sent us to talk to you. He said he thought you might be able to help us with the takedown."

Kane nodded slowly. "Your uncle says you're a smart cookie."

The compliment warmed my heart, though I wasn't sure I liked being called a "cookie."

"But not smart enough to give up on this entirely," Kane added.

So much for warming my heart.

"I need the money," I said.

Kane's lips screwed up into a frown and he made a skeptical noise. "What kind of equipment do you have?"

"Dude," Elijah began.

"Nothing at the moment," I interrupted, not trusting what my friend might say. "Carlos told us we should talk to you about what we needed."

That wasn't strictly true, of course, but I figured it beat admitting I hadn't really realized we would need special equipment.



Kane shook his head, a small smile playing around his lips. “You have a gun?”

“I can get one.” That, at least, wasn’t a lie. Between the uncles who were cops and the uncles who were criminals, I could get almost any kind of gun I needed.

Besides, this was Texas. Guns were easy to find.

“You’ll also need ammunition, of course,” Kane continued. “Regular plus silver for the shapeshifters. Wooden stakes in case you come across any vampires. A good Taser will work on almost anyone, human or supernatural. Handcuffs are never a bad idea. Silver for the werewolves and other shifters, steel for everyone else. Some zip ties won’t hurt, either.”

I glanced at Elijah. “Write this down for us?”

He glanced around with a frown, looking for a pencil or pen.

I tapped his phone.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “Right, dude.”

Kane leaned back in seat, crossing his arms over his chest. “Look. Going after Niko Savas as your first takedown is a terrible idea. If you find out anything useful, call me.”

So he could claim the bounty? No way in hell.

I leaned forward, propping my elbows on the table, maintaining the same distance between us.

“So what happens after I—we,” I gestured between Elijah and me, “—catch someone? How does that work.?”

I could see Kane gauging whether keeping the information from me would stop me from going after Savas. With a sigh, he leaned forward, too, mirroring my stance. “It doesn’t matter whether you’ve got Niko Savas or some small-fry bounty. Once you have them in custody, you call the police and let them know you’re bringing in an FTA.”

“FTA?”

“Failure to appear. It’s what they call someone who skips out on bail. You take them to the station, the clerk fills out paperwork, and they give you a body receipt. You turn that in—for regular humans, you take it to the bondsman who issued the original bond. For supes—”

“Soups?” Elijah interrupted him.

“Supernatural FTAs.”

“Ah. Got it.”

“Supes you take into the paranormal division—same place you picked up your license—I assume you got your license?” When we nodded, he continued speaking. “You go to the paranormal division and turn in the body receipt. They cut you a check, and your work is done.”

I nodded. Seemed simple enough. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Jesus.” Kane shook his head. “You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

“I am. We are.”

Kane’s gaze flickered toward Elijah, and I could see him dismissing my friend with a single glance. Luckily, though, he didn’t seem to be dismissing me quite so readily. “If you pick up any supes, call me. I’ll help you take in your first couple. And if you set eyes on Niko Savas, don’t try to take him down yourself. Call me, and I’ll help.”

“Thank you.” My tone was serious, and I meant it—I suspected Kane was going to be invaluable in my new career.

He shook his head. “Don’t thank me. Thank your uncle. And let him know that as far as I’m concerned, this makes us even.”

Ah. I guess it wasn’t that he wasn’t dismissing me. He just felt like he owed my uncle something. I’d have to remember to ask Carlos what that was about.

Still, I was glad to have the help.

And now I felt like I owed Kane at least enough to tell him about our plans for that night. “Uncle Carlos told me that Niko Savas had been going to some drag bar. The Miss Treatment Club. They have a show tonight—Elijah and I

are headed over there.”

“Let me know if you learn anything interesting.” His cell phone dinged, and Kane glanced at the screen. “Gotta go. Keep me posted.”

I had to admit, I was glad he didn’t seem to have any interest in joining us at Miss Treatment.

I would take him up on his offer to help bring Niko Savas in, but I liked the idea of at least tracking the fugitive werewolf down myself.

With Elijah’s help, of course.

Kane stood and dropped two twenty-dollar bills on the table.

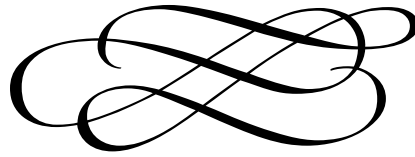
“I’ve got this,” I protested.

“No,” he said. “Go get yourself some gear. I don’t know that you’re gonna need it, but I’d never forgive myself—and more to the point, Carlos would never forgive me—if you came face-to-face with an FTA and got hurt.”

Then Kane was gone, and I drained my coffee. “Let’s go see what kind of gear we can get for fifty dollars.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Elijah replied, sucking down the last of his Coke and following me out the door.

# CHAPTER 5



**B**ack in my car, Elijah I sat in the parking lot for a few minutes discussing what to do.

“Send me that list of supplies you made while I was talking to Kane,” I said.

It pinged through to my phone, and I stared at it for a minute.

Gun. That would be too expensive right now.

“Handcuffs and strip ties,” I said slowly. “Where would we get something like that?”

“There’s a sex shop off of 75.” From his tone, I suspected Elijah was joking, but really...

“That’s not a terrible idea. They’ll at least have handcuffs.”

“Really?”

“Good enough for now, anyway. We’ll need something to hold Savas when we catch him.”

“I guess so.” Elijah sounded skeptical, but I looked up the address on my phone and got directions.

Twenty minutes later, we pulled into the parking lot of Wander Lust Adult Toys & Gifts and parked.

I hadn't actually ever been inside a sex toy store in Dallas though I'd once gone to one in California with some friends in college when we'd been on the hunt for a joke birthday present for my friend Cassandra.

Cassie hadn't appreciated her gifts that year.

That shop had been a discreet storefront in a strip mall.

Wander Lust, on the other hand, was situated in a building that had once been a combination gas station and truck stop but had since been converted. It looked a little like a giant barn.

Elijah stared at it, his eyes round. "Dude. It's like the Porno-Stuckey's."

I snickered, and we got out of the car. There were only two other vehicles in the parking lot. I was guessing they didn't really do much business at three o'clock on a Friday afternoon.

Inside Wander Lust, the store was a lot more upscale than I'd expected.

It still had the fluorescent lights and speckled brown-and-white tile floor of the original truck stop, but the new owner had taken the time to install dressing rooms in the back corner, and the store's wares were displayed on shelves and racks about chest high, with some of the larger items—like something called a 'bondage board,' which looked like a cross between the nap-pad I'd had in Kindergarten and a Russian gulag guard's wet dream, all straps and chains—stored in boxes on higher shelves.

"Whoa," breathed Elijah as if he were reining in an overactive horse. "I was wrong," he whispered. "This is the Porno-Walmart. They've got everything here, dude."

I nodded my overwhelmed agreement.

"Can I help you folks with anything?" A young, curvy red-haired woman wearing a Wander Lust T-shirt and standing behind a counter near the door called out cheerfully.

"Umm. Yes," I said, moving closer to the counter and pitching my voice low, as if there were anyone else here to hear me. "I need handcuffs."

To her credit, she didn't even smirk. "Of course. Those are in our BDSM

section. Right this way.”

She bustled down the center aisle to the back right corner of the cavernous room, straight to a display of whips, paddles, and restraints of various kinds.

“We have a variety of leather cuffs here,” she said, “and of course, our gentle restraint items,”—she gestured toward pink plastic heart-shaped cuffs and another pair wrapped in fake leopard fur. “These all come with the EZ-escape button, here on the side.” She demonstrated on a display model of the fur-lined cuffs.

“Do you have anything a little more... sturdy? Maybe without the escape button?”

My cheeks flamed hot as I asked the question, but she simply nodded.

“Absolutely. We have several strict bondage models.” She moved to another section of the display.

“Wait. What about those?” I interrupted her Vanna White routine.

“Of course,” the clerk said. She pulled the heavy metal handcuffs down and handed them to me.

I hefted them in my hand. The chain linking the two cuffs was solid though of course I had no idea if it would restrain a werewolf.

“How strong are these?” I asked.

“Those have been tested to withstand a torque of 495 pound-force,” she said.

I nodded as if that meant anything at all to me. I checked the price tag on them. Even after I paid for them, Elijah and I would still have more than enough to go to Miss Treatment that night.

“Anything else I can help you find today?” the clerk asked.

I glanced at Elijah, and he shook his head. “No, dude. I think that’s good.”

I could tell from his tone that my friend had no more idea than I did whether these would work.

“Alrighty then.” The clerk smiled and turned away.

As I followed her to the checkout counter, though, I was hit with inspiration. “Wait a minute. Do you have any silver chains?”

The clerk tilted her head, her pale red ponytail swinging to one side as she regarded me. “For restraint?”

“No—like a necklace.”

“Hmm. We do have some body jewelry. Not a necklace, but we have some belly chains.”

“Are they real silver?”

“I think maybe one of them is.” She led us to another part of the store, where she flipped through a wire rack holding some thin, decorative chains. “This one.”

She held out a delicate silver chain with butterfly charms hanging from it at equidistant points. I checked the tag. It at least claimed to be 100% silver.

“What do you think?” I gave Elijah an inquiring look, and he shrugged.

“Pretty,” he opined.

Again, I checked the price tag. If we didn’t buy any drinks, we could still get into the club. “Okay. I think that’s everything.”

The clerk rang us up and dropped my purchases into a plastic bag with Wander Lust printed on the outside.

Because I definitely wanted to advertise that I did my shopping here.

As I turned away from paying for my purchases, I found Elijah staring open-mouthed at a display of dildoes on the wall.

“Dude,” he said in tones of awe, “look at that monstrosity.” He pointed up at a bright red sex toy with a circumference bigger than my wrist, covered in silicone simulated scales, and a dragon’s head at the end.

Toward the middle, it had wings that curved up and toward the tip clearly designed to hit a sensitive spot.

“The wings actually flutter when you turn it on,” the clerk told us in tones of

pride.

“I bet they do,” I muttered.

“Oh, before you go,” the clerk continued. “Do you want to sign our petition?”

I gazed at her warily. “Petition?”

“Yeah. Texas law says you’re not allowed to own more than six sex toys.”

“What?” Okay. I had to admit, that was new to me.

“It’s better than it used to be,” she continued, pulling a clipboard out from under the counter. “The law used to say that you couldn’t own anything that was shaped like a human penis. Activists got that law changed a while ago, but apparently this was the compromise. So now we’re working to change the law again. Kay-tee lube.”

“Um. Pardon me?” I asked, wondering if I’d had a mini-stroke or something.

She tapped the clipboard. At the top of the paper was a heading: Keep Texas Lawmakers Out of Our Bedrooms. “KT-LOOB.”

“Sure, dude,” Elijah said. “I’ll sign it.” He took the pen and filled in his name and contact information, signing with a flourish. Then he handed the pen and clipboard to me.

“Oh, hell. Why not?” I added my information to the petition and signed, too, and then the two of us headed out to my car where I opened the bag with my new handcuffs and belly chain.

Elijah watched me interestedly as I threaded the silver chain through the heavier links of the short chain connecting the two cuffs. Then I wrapped the silver chain around the handcuffs themselves and tied the chain off, so it was more or less secure.

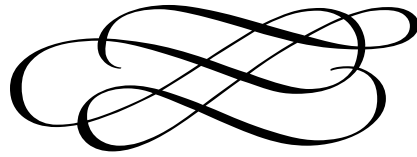
“Smart,” Elijah said.

“It’ll do for now. I hope, anyway.”

Satisfied with the results, I dropped the cuffs into the center console, and headed back to Elijah’s apartment.



## CHAPTER 6



That evening, I headed back over to Elijah's to pick him up for the show at the Miss Treatment Club. Before I left, though, I stood in front of my closet again trying to decide what to wear to a drag show. Finally, I decided that this was my opportunity to dress up like the badass bounty hunter I was aspiring to be.

I pulled on leather pants and a matching leather bustier lined with lace that zipped up the middle and showed off my midriff and the anchor tattoo above my right breast.

I tried to tuck my handcuffs into my pocket, but they wouldn't fit. In the end, I slid one cuff in and left the other dangling out, the silver butterfly charms from the silver chain dangling below it. A glance in the mirror told me that it could pass for a fashion statement.

I just wasn't sure what it said.

When I walked into the living room, my mother gasped. "Oh, *Dios mío*," she said, throwing her hands up into the air. "You cannot wear that out in public, Tessa."

I glanced down at my clothes. "Why not? I'm going out to a club, *Mami*. I promise you, this will be one of the most conservative outfits there." No need to specify that I was going to a drag show. My mother would start crossing herself and praying for my salvation.

There was a reason I had gone to college all the way out in California.

“I promise I’ll be okay,” I said, leaning in to give her a kiss on the cheek.

My mother shook her head, her dark curls flying around her face. “Tell me when you come in,” she instructed me. “I need to know no one has kidnapped you.”

“No one’s going to kidnap me, Mother. Besides, I’ll be with Elijah.”

My mother’s lips pursed as she turned away muttering in Spanish—something about the dangers of the world.

When I got to Elijah’s apartment, I used my key to go in, and he glanced up. “Looking good,” he said—the biggest compliment I was ever likely to get from my best friend.

He, on the other hand, looked exactly like he always did. Like a twenty-something stoner who had gotten fired from his last job and needed a haircut. His floppy, sandy-brown hair drooped in his face as he lit a joint.

“Want a hit before we go?” he asked, his voice strangled with smoke. He held out the joint, and I waved the smoke away from my face.

“No. We’re working tonight, Elijah.”

“I know. That’s why I’ve gotta be cool and calm. Collected and shit.”

*More like somnolent.*

But I didn’t say the thought out loud. Instead, I simply hurried him out the door.

I wanted to make sure we saw Helen Heels tonight. I didn’t know what time she performed.

The Miss Treatment club was in the mid-cities, the collective name for Hearst, Euless, Bedford, and several other small cities in between Dallas and

Fort Worth.

It was also home to several of the Metroplex's sex-themed clubs—probably, I had always assumed, because the mid-cities had fewer zoning restrictions.

Something like that was certainly at play at the Miss Treatment Club. For several minutes after I had exited from Interstate 30 and followed the directions on my phone, I was pretty certain my voice assistant had gotten us lost.

We drove through several neighborhoods that looked like they dated back to the 1970s, all low-slung ranch houses and wide yards.

Then the directions instructed us to turn onto a long, gravel road, and Elijah and I glanced at each other.

“Maybe we should turn around?” I mused aloud.

Just as I was getting ready to pull over and make a U-turn, though, the caliche-graveled road widened, dead-ending into a parking lot half-filled with cars.

The Miss Treatment club was in a row of nightclubs, nestled between the Agony Bar—a BDSM club—and a swingers' club called Sinful Satin.

I guessed it kept all of DFW's sins in one place. And maybe they picked up some foot traffic among them for all I knew.

I hadn't even known these existed until I'd looked them up online. I didn't know that there was more than one swingers' club in Dallas. In high school, my friends and I had driven by Club Candies sometimes to check out the people headed in and out. Elijah had been with me on more than one of those occasions, back when I was likely to get as stoned as he did, and we'd snickered wildly at the idea of all those people having sex inside.

Only later did I learn that Club Candies was part of a national chain. And from the outside, at least, it looked sleek and sexy with flashing disco lights inside and people in dressy clothes waiting to get inside.

This set of clubs was nothing like that.

The gravel parking lot they shared had been created from what appeared to

have been a cow pasture at one point. I suspected the original barbed wire fence still surrounded the property, as it drooped in some areas and was in desperate need of repair.

The three clubs were attached to one another. In the city, the building probably would've been demolished to make way for a strip mall. Here, it looked like it had been converted from an original farmhouse, probably a ranch house not unlike the ones in the neighborhoods surrounding this open patch.

It wouldn't surprise me to learn that all three clubs were owned by the same people. Maybe a farmer who had given up on cattle as the city had grown up around him and turned to kink for his income. Regardless of their origin, though, the clubs seemed to be doing a brisk business now. The parking lot was getting fuller by the moment, and a steady stream of people made their way toward the building, splitting into three separate lines converging toward the doors.

Inside the entrance, the outside light provided enough illumination to show worn industrial grade carpet in a dusty gray that I wasn't sure was the original color—it might just have needed a thorough cleaning.

A heavily made up drag queen wearing a hot pink beehive wig that almost brushed the low ceiling over her head and a nametag proclaiming she was Miss Adelaide took our cover fee, including an extra amount to reserve a table near the front, and stamped our hands with a glow-in-the-dark version of the sign outside.

“Is Helen Heels performing tonight?” I asked, leaning in and raising my voice to be heard above the music thumping steadily in the background.

“Yes she is, sweetheart,” Miss Adelaide said. “She comes on at 9 o'clock.”

“Is there any chance we could talk to her backstage beforehand?”

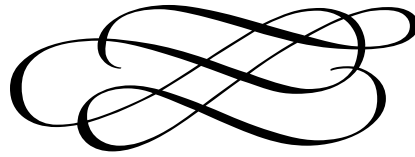
“Oh, sugar. You don't want to go back there. It smells like nacho cheese, hairspray, and despair.” She paused. “Are y'all friends of hers or something?”

“No. Just fans. We were hoping to get a chance to meet her in person.”

Miss Adelaide clapped her hands in delight. “Honey, she will be just thrilled. I will make sure she comes to your table and talks to you after her set.”

Certain that was the best I was going to get, I led the way to our table, stopping at the bar to pick up two plain Dr. Peppers. Even if we had been able to afford alcohol, I wanted to keep my wits about me tonight. Especially since Elijah was, as usual, thoroughly stoned.

# CHAPTER 7



The first two sets were entertaining. I enjoyed the show more than I anticipated.

And then Helen Heels came out on stage. She entered cracking a spangled whip and wearing high-heeled boots that went up to her thighs and were decorated in red, white, and blue sequins in the shape of the Texas flag. She was tall and thin with a round butt that filled out a pair of Daisy Duke shorts that could only ever have been matched by the barely-there tank top holding in her enormous (albeit, I assumed, mostly fake) chest. She had huge blue eyes and giant blond curls that any Texas woman would kill for.

If I thought the first two acts were good, they didn't hold a candle to Helen Heels who belted out the country song, "Hell on Heels," but changed it to match her name. And she could sing. The audience cheered and clapped, and even Elijah stared at her, mesmerized as she strutted across the stage and down among the audience, cracking her whip with pinpoint precision, at one point even using it to pull a drink off one couple's table and taking a swig before she replaced it with a smile and a wink.

When her set ended, Elijah and I cheered as loudly as anyone else in the audience.

I didn't know why Niko Savas had been coming to see Helen Heels, but it wouldn't have surprised me to learn he was in love with her—she had that much charisma.

Almost half the people in the club got up and left when Helen was done with her act, and I felt a little sorry for the performer who came on after her.

But we stuck around, waiting for her to join us at our table.

I have to admit, I was a little starstruck when she sashayed over and pulled up a chair to join us.

“Miss Adelaide told me you wanted to see me,” she said, her voice a throaty alto.

“Can I have your autograph?” Elijah asked, digging in his pockets for something for her to write on.

I guess he was a little starstruck too.

“Of course, darling.” She produced a pen and business card from somewhere—I don’t know where she could’ve found to keep it in her skintight outfit.

She signed it ***Helen Heels*** with a flourish and handed the card to Elijah who blushed furiously.

Then she tilted her head and leaned back a little in her chair as she examined me. “But you’re not here for an autograph, are you?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m here to ask some questions about Niko Savas.”

Helen’s mouth screwed up into a twist and she crossed her arms. “About time someone came to ask me about Niko. What do you want to know?”

Well. This might be easier than I had anticipated. “First of all, I understand he was coming to see you here pretty regularly. Is that right?”

“Only because I asked him to.”

Huh. That was interesting. “Oh really? Why?”

“Niko and I knew each other from my life before, back when I was a hot-shot real estate agent.”

“Okay.” I let the word hang in the air between us.

“Yeah. And I needed him in his werewolf capacity.”

Another surprise. Why would anyone *need* a werewolf? I raised my eyebrows and waited for her to continue.

“Niko didn’t belong to any pack,” she said as if that explained anything.

It didn’t, so I continued waiting.

Helen sighed. “We started having werewolf trouble here about six months ago. They were real animals—not like Niko. These guys are more like dogs. Peeing on everything, marking their territory, claiming Miss Treatment as if it were theirs. One of them even pissed in the icemaker. Can you believe that shit? Took us a solid week to get the smell out—and apparently, the other werewolves could still smell it—they wouldn’t come near us. It kept the other supernaturals away too. Cut our business down by a third.” She shook her head, disgusted even in retrospect. “So I asked Niko to come straighten them out.”

“And did he?”

“Hell, yes. Even before he was a werewolf, Niko was an alpha male. You know what I mean? One look at him, and that pack leader straightened right up.”

“So did Niko ever come back again after that?” I asked.

Helen nodded. “A couple of times. He liked to check in on us, make sure we were doing okay.” She bit her lip. “I can’t believe he’d do a thing like kill his ex-wife.”

“It’s horrible, for sure,” Elijah said.

“No,” Helen corrected him. “You don’t get it. I can’t believe it. I *don’t* believe it. I don’t think he’s the one who killed those two.”

I leaned forward. “You have any idea who did it if not Niko?”

“I don’t. All I know is that while those other werewolves were horrible wild men, true animals, Niko? He was always in control of himself. Even when those other werewolves pissed him off, he just turned around and growled at them. His eyes would start doing that werewolf-glowing thing, and then it would just...fade away. Like he dialed it back. He might’ve wanted to kill his



ex-wife and her stupid new husband, too, but he didn't do it. Niko's got too much self-control."

"Interesting." I drummed my fingernails on the table, trying to decide what else to ask her. I glanced over at Elijah to see if he had any questions, but he was sitting with his chin in his hands staring dazedly at Helen. "I guess that's all."

She stood up. "It was nice talking to you. Hope you stay for the rest of the show, but I need to get backstage again."

I stood up, too, and held out my hand to shake hers. "Thank you for talking to us," I said.

She pulled a second business card out of the pocket of her Daisy Dukes and handed it to me. "You think of anything else you want to know, give me a call."

"Oh," I said. "Hang on. You still have that pen of yours?"

"Sure thing, sweetheart." She pulled it out from between her breasts, and I had to admit, it made me a little jealous. Maybe I could get some pointers from her on making the best of what I had—such as it was.

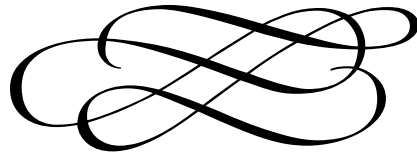
I opened my phone and snapped a picture of the business card, then flipped it over and wrote my name and number on the back. "If you think of anything else I ought to know, you call me."

She winked at me, her long, fake eyelashes fluttering. "Absolutely."

She'd just started to turn away from our table when a loud, resounding thump echoed through the building.

"What the—" The words hadn't even had time to finish leaving my mouth when someone grabbed the back of my bustier and yanked me backward so I stumbled off my feet.

## CHAPTER 8



I staggered back several steps, spinning around just as Riker Kane shouted in my ear, “Come on. We’ve got to get out of here.”

I turned my gaze forward again just in time to see Helen Heels turn and race toward me.

“That was a bomb,” Kane said, his voice blunt and unyielding, and his words sent a chill down my spine.

“Run!” Helen shouted, and for the first time, I heard a masculine burr in her voice.

I twisted out of Kane’s grasp and grabbed Elijah’s hand, but he was already running too. We joined the rest of the crowd heading toward the back of the room, all stampeding toward the exit.

Helen glanced around. “This way,” she hissed, and darted to the left, lifting the hinged pass-through on the bar and leading us to a curtained door. I was the last to go through, and I glanced back at the stage in time to see it go up in flames.

We exited from the storage room behind the bar and raced down a short hallway to the door that led outside, closer to the entrance to Agony than Miss Treatment.

Kane stepped out in front of us. “This way,” he said, his tone commanding.

“But—my car,” I protested, gesturing vaguely toward the parking lot. I glanced at my hand and realized I was still clutching my phone. Apparently, my instinct in a crisis is to hang on to my electronic devices no matter what.

“We’ll come back for it later,” Kane said. “We need to get out of here right now.”

He was right. Besides, my keys were still in my purse, and the last I’d seen it, my purse was hanging on the back of my chair inside the club.

Kane led us across a darkened corner of the parking lot toward the barbed wire fence I’d noticed earlier. When we got there, he stepped on the bottom line of wire, which was already loose, and held the other lines up for us to duck between them.

On the other side of the fence was a giant black pickup truck with both a front and a back seat.

“Yours?” Helen asked.

“Yep,” Kane said, fishing his keys out of his pocket and unlocking the door with a beep.

“Smart move, parking it out here,” Helen noted.

“I try to never get trapped someplace without a clear escape route.”

“Ex-military?” The drag queen asked.

“Marine.”

“Army,” Helen replied, and stuck her hand out for him to shake it.

I half expected Kane to do some hyper-masculine bullshit like refuse to shake, but he took the proffered hand and clasped it briefly, professionally. “Nice to meet you,” he said.

“You too. Always glad to meet a man with an exit plan.”

We all got into the truck, me in the front passenger seat and Helen and Elijah in the back. And then we all turned and stared at the club compound behind us.

A second muffled boom echoed through the night, and screams went up from the parking lot as flames shot out the roof.

“Holy fuck,” Elijah breathed out.

“You’re sure that was a bomb?” I asked Kane, but I already knew the answer. Because I was certain of it too.

Kane nodded grimly.

“My purse was still in there,” I said after we watched the building burning for a long, silent moment. “And my car keys.”

“How far back from the entrance were you parked?” Kane asked.

“About three-quarters of the way down the lot.”

“Your car will be fine, then. Assuming no one runs into it in their panic.”

Cars began streaming out of the parking lot, and Kane started the engine of his truck. “You have another car key at home?”

“Yes.” Thank God.

“I’ll bring you back to pick up your car tomorrow, then.” He put the pickup in drive but paused. “Unless anyone here wants to hang around to talk to the cops?”

All three of us chorused, “No!”

Uncle Carlos always said the cop shop grapevine was better than any gossip loop he’d ever heard of. If he found out I’d been here tonight, he’d do everything he could to keep me from continuing to go after Niko Savas. If I resisted, he’d drag Uncle Tommy into it with him, and if both the cops and the criminals in my family were working against me, I’d never get that bounty money.

“Yeah,” I said. Take me home.”

Kane gave a satisfied nod, making a U-turn on the dirt road and driving away. We were already off the dirt road and two blocks away when we passed emergency vehicles coming from the other direction. Kane pulled over long enough to learn where we each lived and began taking us home

starting with Helen.

As we pulled up in front of her apartment complex, I turned around in the passenger seat to face her. “You know anything that would make someone want to keep you from talking to me?”

She shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

“You still have the card with my information on it?”

“In my pocket.”

“Then think about it, would you? Call me if anything comes to mind.” I waved my phone at her.

She nodded and climbed down from the back seat. We watched her until she had let herself into her apartment with a key she fished out from under the flowerpot next to the front door.

Kane gave me a sharp glance. “You think you’re important enough for someone to want to keep her from talking to you?”

I wrapped my arms around my waist and leaned back in the seat, shaking my head. “No. But maybe Helen knows something important enough for someone to want to keep her from telling anyone. Even me.”

Kane narrowed his eyes thoughtfully but didn’t say anything else as we headed back up to Dallas to drop off Elijah.

“Dude,” my best friend said as we pulled to a stop in front of his apartment. “Next time you want me to go with you to a drag show? Ask somebody else.” But he shot me a crooked grin as he climbed out of the back seat, so I knew he was only about half serious.

Kane headed toward my house without looking up the address.

“You know your way around Dallas pretty well,” I observed.

“Been working these streets a long time.”

He couldn’t have been more than six or seven years older than I was, but what did I know? I’d grown up here, but I’d also been away from Dallas for years.

I glanced over at Kane. “What were you doing at Miss Treatment, anyway?” I asked.

He didn’t answer for a moment, and I spent several seconds studying his profile in the dashboard lights.

“I had a bad feeling about it,” he said. “I was afraid you were going to get yourself in over your head—and I was right.”

“Oh, that’s not fair,” I said, indignant at the implication that this was all my fault. “The bombing might not have had anything to do with me asking questions about Niko Savas.”

“You don’t believe that any more than I do,” he said quietly.

He was right. I didn’t have any hard evidence to back up my feeling, but it didn’t change the fact that something ominous was twisting in my gut.

Somehow, someone had figured out that Helen Heels was likely to say something they didn’t want anyone else to know.

Apparently, Kane had come to a similar conclusion.

I didn’t have any idea where to start looking for who that someone might be. I’d told pretty much everyone I’d talked to today where I was going tonight—and I’d done so in plenty of public places too.

Hell, for all I knew, someone might’ve been watching Kane and overheard our conversation.

“Don’t talk to anybody else about any of this until after I see you tomorrow, okay? I’ll be here at about seven in the morning,” Kane said.

“Okay.” My voice was smaller than I’d intended it to be.

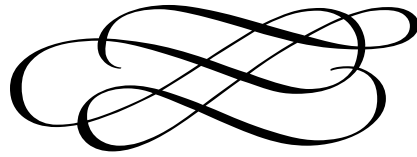
Kane watched me as I made my way to my parents’ front porch, where I fished my own extra key out from under the fake rock in the garden by the door.

I had just let myself into the quiet, darkened entryway and locked the door behind me when a hand wrapped around me from behind, clamping down over my mouth.

“Don’t scream,” a man said.

Great. For the second time in one night, some man had grabbed me when I wasn’t expecting it.

# CHAPTER 9



**K**eeping one hand clamped tightly over my mouth, my captor reached around in front of my eyes with his other hand and flexed his fingers.

I didn't need to see the razor-sharp claws pop out of his fingertips to know I was talking to a werewolf.

I already knew it was Niko Savas.

"I don't want to hurt you," he whispered in my ear, "but I will if I have to. And I know you don't want those lovely parents of yours getting hurt, either. So don't make a sound, and everything will be just fine. Got it?"

I nodded, and he peeled his palm away from my mouth, keeping the shifted hand in front of my face.

Slowly, I turned to face him.

I hadn't really understood what Helen had meant when she said his eyes glowed, but now I could see it in the dark. In all his photos, his eyes had been dark brown. Now, they were a weird silvery blue and emitting a light from within that looked remarkably like an animal's eyes reflecting car headlights.

My mouth went dry with fear, and I had to swallow hard before I could speak again.

"We can talk in the dining room," I whispered. "Follow me."



He padded along behind me completely silent. I wondered absently if he'd had that skill before he'd been turned into a werewolf or if it was just one of those predator things he picked up after the change.

Or if he had figured out how to move without making a sound when he went on the run after jumping bail.

In the dining room, I gingerly pulled out a chair stopping long enough to turn on the decorative lamp my mother had on the sideboard cabinet against the far wall.

"I want to get a glass of water," I said. "Do you want one?"

Savas shook his head, but said, "I'll come with you."

I tiptoed through to the kitchen where I took a water glass out of the cabinet to the right of the sink. "You sure you don't want one?" I asked, pitching my voice low.

Savas leaned back against the countertop and crossed his arms. "Yeah, go ahead. I'll take one."

I got another glass then moved to the refrigerator and used the water dispenser to fill both glasses. I tilted my head toward the dining room. It was the only downstairs space that had a closing door on each side and was the farthest downstairs space from my parents' upstairs bedroom. I'd learned years ago that they could sleep through almost any noise from the dining room.

I set both glasses down on the floral placemats my mother kept on the table, years of training telling me that she'd kick my ass if I left water rings on her grandmother's dining table.

I kept a wary eye on Savas, who watched me just as closely.

"I'm going to shut the doors now." I gestured at them but didn't move until Savas gave me a go-ahead nod.

I saw Savas considering where to sit. On the one hand, if he took my father's seat at the head of the table, he'd be able to see both doors at once. But he'd be trapped against the back wall with no easy way out. On the other hand, if

he took my mother's chair, he'd have an easy exit, but his back would be to one of the doors.

In the end, he took my seat, which gave him diminished visibility and diminished ability to exit easily—but the other seats were worse. But this way, he wasn't trapped, and he wasn't blind.

I moved around and down across from him at the space we'd always reserved for guests. I wasn't afraid of anyone in this house other than Savas, and as long as we had the table between us, I actually wasn't all that afraid of him, either.

In any case, I didn't need to see anyone who might come in—no more than might be necessary to throw myself in front of them to protect them from the werewolf in our dining room.

I took a drink of my water, my hands shaking so badly that a little of it sloshed over the top.

Savas frowned. "I'm not going to hurt you," he said.

"Why are you here?" I asked, my voice trembling almost as badly as my hands.

"You went to see Helen Heels tonight, didn't you?"

"Yes." I decided I'd be better off keeping my answers short and simple.

"What did she tell you?"

I blinked. "Nothing important, as far as I could tell. Just that you had come to help her with some werewolf pack that was trying to take over the clubs." So much for short and simple.

He nodded, tapping the fingertips of his unshifted hand against the tabletop. As I watched, the claws on his right hand retracted, the hand itself regaining its normal human shape.

"I didn't want her to get mixed up in this," Savas muttered, but I got the feeling he was talking to himself more than to me.

"Someone firebombed her club tonight. Did you know that?" I asked, finally

daring to say something that wasn't an answer to a direct question.

"Yeah." He ran his hand over his eyes, apparently failing to notice that it had shifted back. With a breathy sigh, he leaned back and tilted his head backward until it touched the top of the chair. "Jesus Christ. This has turned into such a mess." He closed his eyes for a brief moment, then shook his head and sat up straight.

*Do not feel sorry for the werewolf, Tessa.*

But no matter how I reprimanded myself, I felt a twinge of sympathy go through me.

What if Helen was right and Niko Savas hadn't committed these murders?

What if he was innocent?

*It's not my job to figure that out,* I reminded myself. Hell, it wasn't even really my job to catch him. *I'm just doing this so I can get enough money to make it until I can get a real job.*

Preferably one that didn't involve hanging out in clubs that got firebombed or getting kidnapped in my own home by homicidal werewolves.

Except this werewolf did not seem homicidal.

*If I had any sense at all, I would call the police now.*

After I handcuffed him.

It was all I could do to keep from thwacking myself in the forehead.

*Handcuffs.*

I had handcuffs threaded with a silver chain in my pocket. I could have slapped them on his hand when he was showing me those claws, and this would have been done with.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

I mentally measured the distance across the table. Would I be able to get the cuffs out, get them open, and slide them on Savas's wrists—or even one wrist—before he could do serious damage to me?

If Savas had been a regular human, maybe. But I'd seen those specials on the news programs where they showed videos of shapeshifters running.

Those fuckers were fast.

Nope. I wasn't willing to risk it.

While those thoughts had been racing through my mind, chasing each other in futile circles, Niko Savas had been examining me across the table as well.

"What's your connection to Riker Kane?" he asked.

I crossed my arms over my chest protectively. No way in hell was I going to give up Uncle Carlos. I didn't have a chance against a werewolf—but it was still more of a chance than a man in a wheelchair might have. "No connection," I said. "Just met the man today."

Savas gave me a skeptical look. "Then why did he help you tonight? There must have been at least a dozen people who've approached him for advice finding me. He turned them all away. Except you. What's so special about you?"

"Wait a minute. You're here to question me because Kane talked to me?"

"I'm asking the questions here. Why is Riker working with you? And what led you to the Miss Treatment club?"

This time, I was the one who rubbed my eyes. Then I dropped my head on the table where I banged it gently three times against my folded hands. I was genuinely that frustrated, but the move also gave me time to think of a lie.

"The officer at the county courthouse thought I was cute," I said, the lie rolling smoothly off my tongue. "He gave me a tip. Two tips, actually—to talk to Kane and then to Helen Heels."

"And I suppose Riker Kane thought you were cute too?"

I shrugged. "Guess so."

Savas shook his head. "I'm not buying it. No way would a woman get to Kane. That man is as professional as they come."

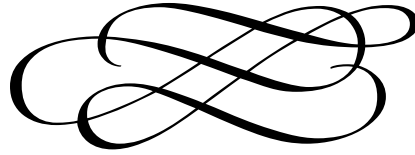
I held my hands out wide and shrugged. "I can't make you believe me. But

that's all I have to tell you.”

Savas opened his mouth to reply but was forestalled by my mother's voice floating in from the stairs.

“Tessa? Is that you?”

# CHAPTER 10



“**H**ide under the table,” I hissed. “I’ll get rid of her.”

I don’t know why I said it. I didn’t even think before I did.

Apparently, some part of me believed Uncle Carlos’s intuition and Helen’s story about Niko Savas being an innocent man.

He gave me a dark look.

“If you don’t want to go back to jail right now, you will hide from my mother.”

Words I never expected to say to a werewolf.

He didn’t crawl under the table, but he did slide up behind the door that led out to the living room so my mother wouldn’t see him when I opened the door.

I grabbed the knob, but Niko dropped a heavy hand on my shoulder. I expected him to give me some warning, but instead, he whispered, “Talk to my assistant at my company. Lena Standish.”

Then he gave me a little shove, and I opened the door and moved out into the living room to deal with my mother.

“*Hola, Mami,*” I greeted my mother who stood at the bottom of the stairs.

“Did I hear you talking to someone in there?” she asked.

“Just myself. I was singing a song,” I extemporized.

Mom frowned. “I told you to let me know when you got home.”

“I’ve only been in long enough to go to the kitchen for a glass of water.”

“Oh. Okay. You know what? I think I could use a glass of water too.” She stepped off the bottom stair step and turned toward the dining room, the quickest route to the kitchen.

“I’ll get it for you,” I offered hastily.

She frowned, but I didn’t wait to hear what she had to say. Instead, I turned and dashed into the dining room where Niko still stood, his eyes glowing that eerie shade of silvery blue.

I swiped my water glass off the table and scurried back out the door almost bumping into my mother. “Here,” I said, thrusting the glass at her. “You can have mine. I didn’t drink out of it yet.”

“You’re acting odd, *mija*,” she said.

“Nah. I’m just revved up from the show we saw at the club tonight. It was really good.” I linked my arm through hers and tugged her back toward the stairs. “I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow. You should get back to bed.”

“Okay,” she said. “Just don’t stay up too late.” She began moving back upstairs and paused to drop a kiss on my forehead.

“I will. Good night, *Mami*.” I stood at the bottom of the stairs watching until she disappeared into her room.

As soon as she was out of sight, I turned and scurried back into the dining room, planning to tell Niko exactly what I thought of his decision to invade my home.

But the werewolf fugitive was gone.

I walked through the downstairs checking every room and hissing his name. But he was nowhere to be found.

*Jesus.*

I dropped down onto the sofa in the living room and exhaled loudly.

Why the hell hadn't I taken him in when I had the chance?

*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

The longer I thought about it, the more I began to believe that perhaps Niko Savas actually had not committed the murders he was accused of.

Otherwise, why was he still in Dallas?

According to everything I had learned about him in the last few days, he could have gone into hiding for a good long time. And although he'd had to surrender his passport when he made bail, a lifetime of television told me that if you had enough money, you could overcome a little problem like no passport.

Niko Savas had the money.

I hadn't been anywhere near tracking him down. I wasn't a threat to him, even if Riker Kane was helping me. I was, however, connected to Riker—and that meant that anything Niko said to me was likely to get back to Kane.

Which made me the perfect person for Niko to talk to about his innocence.

Because Kane was the perfect person to prove that innocence.

*Shit.*

I wanted that \$50,000.

But I didn't want to send an innocent man to prison.

I sat chewing on the fingernail of my left pinky trying to decide what to do.

Maybe there was a way to make this work out for everyone.

If I could prove that Niko Savas had not killed his ex-wife and her new husband, and then I turned in the evidence of that at the same time I turned him in, maybe I could get the \$50,000 *and* make sure an innocent man walked free.

Ugh. This was going to be a lot more difficult than I had originally expected.



And I hadn't thought it was going to be easy.

With that realization, I hoisted myself off the sofa and trudged upstairs toward bed.

The next morning, voices floating up from downstairs woke me.

I dragged myself out of bed, pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, then twirled my tangled hair into a bun on top of my head, and secured it with a blue plastic butterfly clip.

Barefoot, I padded downstairs where I followed the voices to the dining room.

Both dining room doors were open which explained why I could hear them. And sitting at the table were my parents, Elijah, and a tall thin man it took me a moment to recognize.

"Helen," I exclaimed.

"Good morning," the drag queen replied.

"I called Helen this morning," Elijah said. "Since her club burned down, I thought maybe she might want to join us in tracking down Niko."

"I see," I said weakly.

"Hope you don't mind," Helen said, hefting a large plastic makeup case out of a duffel bag on the floor and thumping it onto the table.

"Of course not," I said.

After all, what was one more partner in this psychotic venture?

"There are pancakes in the kitchen," my father told me. "We've eaten, but we save some for you."

With a nod, I staggered into the kitchen and poured myself a cup of coffee,

stopping to sprinkle cinnamon sugar on one of the pancakes. I rolled it up like a tortilla and took a bite.

I carried my breakfast back into the dining room and pulled up one of the extra chairs.

“Tessa,” my mother reprimanded me. “Get a plate.”

I popped the last bite of my pancake roll into my mouth and held up my hands in a shrug. “All gone,” I said around a full mouth.

My mother shook her head. “*Dios mío.*”

At that moment, my parents finally realized what Helen was doing.

A man sitting at our table putting on makeup.

Luckily, they were both too polite to say anything, but I saw the glance they exchanged, and I bit back a giggle.

“So what are we doing today?” Elijah asked, swirling his last bite of pancake around in syrup and popping it into his mouth.

“I thought maybe we should go talk to Niko’s office employees.” My voice sounded far too innocent to be real, but no one seemed to notice—good thing, too, since I wasn’t about to explain that the idea had come from Niko himself.

“Sounds like a plan,” Helen said, pulling her blonde wig out of the bag at her feet and beginning the process of pinning it onto her head.

“I’m going to go take a shower,” I announced. “Give me ten minutes.”

When I made it back downstairs, Helen had finished her hair and makeup. “Can I use your bathroom before we leave?” she asked.

My father nodded wordlessly, staring at the drag queen in open-mouthed amazement.

“There’s one to the right of the stairs,” I told Helen, who gathered up her bag and disappeared.

“Who the hell is that?” my father asked in a stage whisper.

“That’s Helen Heels,” Elijah said, his tone dreamy.

Yep. My best friend definitely had a crush.

“Why is he dressed like...*that*?”

I shook my head. “She’s a drag queen, Daddy,” I said. “Be nice.”

When Helen emerged from the bathroom, her transformation was complete. She wore what I presumed were her normal street clothes—jeans and fire-engine-red pumps with a form-fitting turtleneck in a matching shade of red.

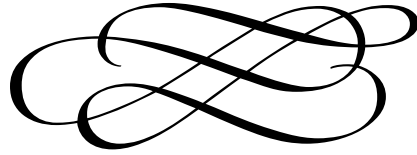
Elijah jumped to his feet to hover at her elbow. “You ready to go, Tessa?” he asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

For a moment, I considered calling Riker Kane to let him know where we were going.

But with my luck, he’d show up to join in the interrogation of Niko’s assistant, and I already had enough of an entourage as it was.

# CHAPTER 11



The temperature had dropped outside, finally resembling something like winter—or as close to it as Dallas ever gets—so I had gotten dressed in black leggings, a matching sweater, and tall black boots.

I had taken a shower, but I'd simply braided my hair to get it out of my face rather than washing and styling it.

And Helen's perfectly made-up face had shamed me into actually applying a little makeup—purple eyeliner that made my brown eyes look even bigger, a little mascara, and a touch of mauve lip gloss to tie it all together.

Even dressed up more than I had been in several months, walking into the headquarters of Niko's business made me feel positively shabby.

The corporate offices occupied the twenty-first floor of one of the high-rises in downtown Dallas, and everyone there was dressed in sharp suits. Mostly in shades of black and white, set off nicely by the gray decor.

A blond receptionist sat behind a counter-high desk just inside the entrance. "Can I help you?" she asked, raising one eyebrow as she took in my motley crew. If she had sounded any more superior, she could have auditioned to be the Queen of England.

"I need to speak to Niko Savas's assistant," I said. "Lena Standish."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Standish is not available at the moment."

I didn't believe her. She just didn't want to let us in.

"She's going to want to speak to me," I said.

"Perhaps you could leave a message, and she could get back to you?"

Yeah, right. Lena Standish would never call me back if this woman was in charge of relaying any message I might leave.

I chewed on the inside of my lip for a second, then made a decision. "Niko Savas sent me."

The receptionist blinked, her mouth falling open "Niko..."

"Yes. Niko told me to talk to Lena Standish."

The supercilious expression falling from her face, the receptionist picked up the receiver on her phone and pressed a button. "Ms. Standish, I have some..." She glanced at us, clearly trying to decide how to describe us. "Some people here who claim that Mr. Savas sent them to talk to you. Yes. That's right. They say Niko sent them. Certainly. Of course."

She replaced the receiver in the cradle and came around from behind the counter. "If you'll follow me this way, Ms. Standish will speak to you momentarily."

Behind me, Helen and Elijah gave each other high-fives. I ignored them and fell into step behind the receptionist who led us down a long, lushly carpeted hallway to a small waiting room outside an office. "You can wait here. Miss Standish will be out momentarily."

The furnishings in the waiting room were stylish but uncomfortable, so after only a minute or two, I stood up and began pacing.

Standish only made us wait about five more minutes, and then she opened the door to her office. "Come on in," she said. To her credit, her double take when she saw us all was less obvious than the receptionist's had been. As we filed into her office, she directed us to several chairs arrayed in front of her desk. "Can I get you anything? Water, coffee?"

"Water would be lovely," Helen said in her throatiest voice.

“Of course.” She moved to a small, glass-fronted refrigerator and pulled out three miniature bottles, handing one to each of us.

I set mine down on the floor beside me and crossed my legs trying to look professional.

Lena Standish was a small, wiry woman in her late forties, probably a good fifteen years older than Niko. She had bleach blond hair cut in a severe bob and wore a black pantsuit with a white, collared shirt and heels that gave her an extra two or three inches.

She looked like a high school math teacher who had gotten dressed up and gone to work in corporate Dallas.

“Now, what can I help you with?” she asked.

“We’re here to talk to you about Niko’s arrest,” I said.

“I’ve already talked to the police,” she said. “I don’t have anything useful to tell you.”

“I’m not with the police,” I said. “And Niko seems to think that you had something valuable that you could tell me.”

“When did you speak to Niko?”

I stared at Standish for a moment, trying to decide how much to share with her. In the end, I decided that if Niko trusted her enough to send me to her, then I needed to trust her enough to tell her how I’d gotten here. “Last night,” I said.

From beside me, Elijah and Helen both gasped. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw them both whip their heads around to stare at me.

Lena Standish gave me an appraising look. “I see,” she said, drawing the word out. “What did he say to you?”

“He told me that he did not kill his ex-wife. And rather to my surprise, I’m inclined to believe him,” I added.

Standish nodded slowly. “I don’t believe he did it,” she said, clearly having come to the decision to go ahead and talk to me.

Beside me, Elijah was fidgeting, clearly desperate to jump in and ask questions, but he managed to contain himself.

“What makes you think that?” I asked.

“Darlene Savas was no one Niko would have wasted his time killing—assuming, of course, that he’d been inclined to kill anyone at all.” Standish leaned back in her leather executive’s chair and crossed her arms over her chest. “The man that she married after she and Niko got divorced was, to put it bluntly, trash. A real monster.”

“Amon Brandt, right?” Helen asked. Apparently, she’d done her homework on the Savas case—either that, or she’d seen all the same newscasts I had.

“Right.” Standish shook her head. “He was horrible.”

“How so?” I asked.

“Cruel to Darlene. Violent. Hit her a few times I know of.” Her mouth twisted up. “But Darlene wouldn’t leave him. Even after she’d left Niko for Brandt, Niko tried to convince Darlene to walk away from Brandt. Those were the phone calls that convinced the police Niko must have had something to do with the murders.”

“Who do you think killed Darlene and Amon?” I watched her face carefully, hoping her expression would give something away.

“I don’t know. But my guess is that it was someone Amon was connected with. He didn’t have any obvious means of income, but he lived really well. And right toward the end of her life, Darlene told Niko she wanted to meet with him—that she’d learned something about Amon that concerned her.”

“What did she tell him in that meeting?”

“Nothing. She didn’t make it to the meeting. That was the day she and Brandt were murdered. And Niko was the one who discovered their bodies when he went to meet her that afternoon.”

“Do you think it was a set-up?” Elijah asked.

“I think it was a terrible coincidence.” She paused, wringing her hands in her lap. “But since then, Niko has contacted me, too.”

I raised my eyebrows. “What did he say?”

“He gave me an address.”

“What’s there?” Helen asked.

“A warehouse.”

“And inside the warehouse?” I prodded her.

“No clue. I told Niko I wasn’t going to get myself arrested for him, even though I do believe him when he says that he didn’t kill Darlene and Amon.”

“So you never checked out the address?” I was beginning to think it might be worthwhile to see what was there.

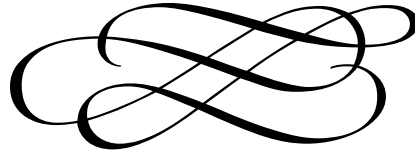
“Not beyond checking to see who owned it.”

“And?”

She shrugged. “Some LLC. No idea who owns it, but I didn’t dig too deep. If it’s connected to those murders, I don’t want to get anywhere close to it.”



# CHAPTER 12



“**W**hat are we going to do now?” Elijah asked as we made our way out to the high-rise building’s garage. “Are we going to check out the warehouse?”

I’d gotten the address from Standish with exactly that in mind.

“Tonight. After dark,” I said, climbing into the driver’s seat. I glanced at my gas gauge as I started the car. “If we’re going to keep doing this, we need a little bit of spending money. See if any of the FTAs listed on that website look like they might be easy to bring in.”

“Whoa. There’s a website?” Helen asked from the back seat, scooting to the middle and leaning forward to look over Elijah’s shoulder as he scrolled through the list of paranormal bail jumpers.

Elijah’s cheeks turned bright pink with the attention.

“Here’s one that might do,” he said.

“Tell me about it.”

“So, it’s a vampire with a Dallas address. She was arrested for public disturbance.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Hey,” Helen said, reaching over to point at Elijah’s phone screen. “Click there, where it says arrest report.”

Elijah clicked and scanned the screen.

He snorted. “You ready for this?”

“Actually, give me the address first. You can tell me about it on the way.”

He read out the address, and I entered it into my own phone for directions. I pulled out of the parking lot and headed over to Central Expressway. Rosalind Smith lived in North Dallas. Though I guess lived might not be exactly the right terminology for what a vampire did. Anyway, that’s where she resided.

“Okay,” I said. “Tell me about Rosalind disturbing the peace.”

Elijah snickered. “Apparently, some missionaries showed up at her door just as she was getting up one evening and offered to talk to her about Jesus.”

“And she didn’t take too kindly to that, I’m guessing?” Helen asked.

“Not at all. The police report says she chased them down the block yelling...” He glanced down at the screen and read aloud. “‘I’m going to kill you with my devil vagina and then drain all your blood for my dinner.’”

“Okay, then. No one mentioned anyone’s Lord and Savior when we get there,” I instructed.

“Aye-aye, Captain,” Helen said with a laugh, sitting back in the seat.

I glanced in the rearview mirror. “And you are *not* a vampire,” I said. “If we’re in a car wreck, you could die. Besides, I don’t want to get a ticket. Please put on your seatbelt.”

Rosalind lived—again not sure that’s the right term—in a nicer home than I had expected in a standard North Dallas suburb subdivision.

Then again, I guess if you were a vampire, you could save up to afford some things.

I realized as we made our way to her front door that I didn’t have anything that might work as a stake—I needed to get the bounty money from this not only so I could fill my car up with gas, but also so I could finish getting everything on the shopping list Riker had given me.

However, there was a live oak tree in Rosalind's front yard, so I paused to break off the end of a short, thin branch.

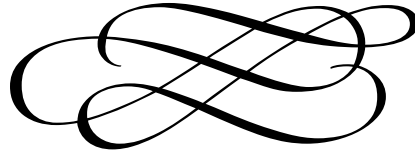
Surely that would do if I had to defend myself.

But really, I was hoping I wouldn't.

After we pulled up to the vampire FTA's house, I pulled the silver-chain-wrapped handcuffs out of the center console of my Kia and tucked them into the waistband of my leggings with one cuff inside my pants and one cuff hanging out. They pulled the waistband a little, causing my leggings to droop, but it was the most secure place I could find for them.

We all three trooped up to the vampire's door and I knocked.

# CHAPTER 13



After a moment, a voice thick with sleep came through the door. “Who is it?”

“My name is Tessa Fury,” I called out. “Is this Rosalind Smith?”

“Yeah.” She sounded surly and wary all at the same time.

“I’m here because you missed your court appearance and I need to...” My voice trailed off.

What the hell could I say to her?

*I need to take you in to get some money* didn’t seem likely to get the response I wanted.

“To take you in to reschedule your court date,” I finally came up with.

“You’re not here to talk to me about God, are you?” Smith asked.

Behind me, Helen snickered.

“No, ma’am, I’m not.”

The door opened a crack and Rosalind Smith scuttled back away from it into the darkened entrance hallway. “Well, come on in. I can’t go out in the sunlight.”

Right. Vampire.

I opened the door and stepped in carefully. It was pitch black inside, and the cloudy gray afternoon daylight from outside penetrated only a couple of feet into the foyer.

“Hello?” I called out.

“Back here,” the vampire replied.

The house smelled musty and slightly rotten like trash that had been left out for too long.

Helen wrinkled her nose and stepped back out onto the small portico. “Nope,” she said. “Not going in there.”

I couldn’t blame her. I didn’t really want to go inside, either.

But bringing in this FTA would net me a couple hundred dollars—enough to allow me to buy the gear I needed and last me through the rest of the week, at least.

Possibly even enough to buy myself a real stake.

I turned my face back to the door as if to look at Helen and inhaled a deep breath of fresh air, hoping it would get me through the next couple of minutes.

“Okay, Ms. Smith. I need you to come with me, please.”

“Do you have a light-proof transportation vehicle?”

“Well, umm...no.”

“Maybe you should come farther inside so we can talk about it. Make a plan for how you’re going to get me to the courthouse to reschedule without me catching on fire.”

Something about her voice sent chills down my spine. Apparently, it had the same effect on Elijah, because suddenly, he spun on his heel and bolted toward the door, muttering, “Nope. I’m out of here too.”

Great. Some backup Helen and Elijah were turning out to be.

I redoubled my grip on my makeshift stake and reached down to check my

handcuffs again.

If I'd had one of those Tasers that worked from a distance, I could have aimed it at the creepy voice and taken her down with it.

But I didn't have any Taser at all yet.

*Next time, I am calling in Riker to help.*

But I hadn't wanted to share my measly two hundred dollars with yet another person.

I took another step into the pitch black of the house.

"That's it," Rosalind Smith's voice suddenly came from behind me, right in my ear.

Her foul breath rushed against my neck, and I gagged at the scent of it. Her clawed hands gripped my shoulders, and I let out an involuntary screech. Without me thinking about it, my arms flailed around me, and my stick went flying into the darkness of the house.

But I knew where her hands were—still on my shoulders as she prepared, I assumed, to take a bite out of me—and I quietly took my handcuffs out of the waistband of my leggings.

With one hand, I pushed the cuff open, then ducked down while reaching up to grab the vampire's wrist. I slapped the cuff on her, and she let out a deafening shriek.

She yanked her wrist out of my grasp, and the second cuff swung around and knocked me right in the middle of the forehead with a resounding thump that echoed through my head.

"Ouch!" I screamed, clapping both hands to my head.

The vampire, who could see in the dark, chose that moment to tackle me to the ground.

I went down fighting, kicking and clawing to try to get away from the monster who was attacking me.

That's when I realized she was screeching actual words. "I will kill you with

my evil vagina and then drain your blood for dinner!”

Apparently, that was her standard line.

With a grunt, I wrapped one leg around her in a move I’d seen when watching high school wrestling matches and flipped her over onto her back, landing on top of her. “You will do no such thing,” I shouted, bearing down on her with all my weight.

She bucked under me trying to throw me off, but I had grabbed the other empty cuff and I attached it to my wrist.

“You. Are. Coming. With. Me.” I ground out, punctuating each word with a punch to her face.

Texas women might be raised to be polite, but we’re also pretty damn scrappy when it comes right down to it.

There was no way in hell I was letting this vampire bitch get away.

By the time I was done, she was holding her free hand in front of her face. “Okay, okay. I’ll go. Quit hitting me.”

I stood up and pulled Rosalind Smith to her feet. Then I headed toward the door dragging her behind me.

“You can’t take me out there,” she protested. “I will burn to a cinder. Literally.”

I heaved a sigh. “Fine. Elijah! I need you to come in here and find a blanket or something.”

Elijah opened the door, and beside me, the vampire twitched as light filtered into the entryway.

I glanced down at the floor and caught sight of my twig. I bent down and scooped it up, then held it against the vampire’s chest, roughly where I thought her heart would be. “Make a move, and I will stake you. I don’t want to kill you, but as a paranormal bounty hunter, I have the right to use deadly force when necessary. Especially since you attacked me.”

Elijah moved through the house, clicking on lights as he went.

“Oh, gross,” he said from one of the bedrooms.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Everything back here is, like, coated in blood. It’s all crusty and disgusting.”

The vampire in my grasp shook her head. “I’d like to see how neat you’d be if all you could eat was blood.”

I swallowed down bile. “Grab the cleanest thing you see,” I instructed Elijah.

A moment later, he returned, holding a dark blanket out in front of him.

“Throw it over her head,” I instructed him.

I carefully removed the cuff from my wrist and chained Rosalind’s hands behind her back. As soon as I was certain she was completely covered by the blanket, I guided her out the door and to my car.

“Is this going to take long?” she asked.

“Are you serious? You want me to make sure you’re not too inconvenienced after you attacked me?” I shook my head in disgust.

When we got to the car, Helen had moved into the front seat.

Elijah scowled at her.

Maybe the bloom was already fading from that crush.

I got Smith secured in the passenger-side back seat, and Elijah went around to the other side to get in behind me.

Before we reached the end of the block, I had rolled down first my window, then everyone else’s, too.

As we headed back toward downtown Dallas, Rosalind Smith’s muffled voice came from the back seat. “It smells kind of funky under here.”

“It’s not much better out here, Princess,” Helen said.

“I think you should get your car cleaned or something,” the vampire added a few miles later.



“I’ll definitely need to after this,” I muttered.

Fifteen minutes later, we pulled up to the special courthouse annex that had been built to house paranormal criminals for short periods.

The three humans in the car tumbled out, gasping at the fresh air. Then I pulled Rosalind Smith out of the back seat, and she began wailing. “The blanket is slipping off. I’m going to burn.”

“Quit whining,” I said. “You’re completely covered, and we’re going inside. They have windowless cells in here just for vampires.”

“Cells!? I thought you said you were taking me to reschedule.”

I gripped her handcuffed hands through the blanket and gave her a little shove. “I am.”

The cops would be the ones putting her in jail to wait for her new court date.

The automatic doors to the building swept open, and I steered her inside to the desk where I recognized Officer Callahan.

“FTA here,” I said. “Rosalind Smith.”

Callahan wrinkled his nose. “Vampire?”

“How did you guess?” I asked dryly.

“I’d recognize that stench anywhere.” He sighed but logged into his computer and filled out the necessary forms. A moment later, he printed out an official body receipt for me and signed it as a second officer showed up to book Rosalind Smith.

Callahan handed me my cuffs back gingerly, holding them out with two fingers. “You might want to scrub these. After you trade in your body receipt for the bounty. You have about—” He checked his watch. “—thirty minutes to go turn that in. Otherwise, you’ll have to wait until tomorrow.” He paused. “Congrats on your first bounty, by the way.”

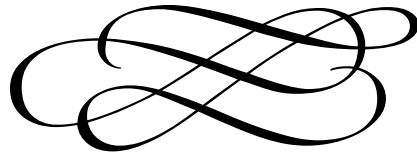
I grinned widely. “Thanks.”

Then he wrinkled his nose. “And after you cash that in, you might want to go home and take a shower.”

He was right.

I stank.

# CHAPTER 14



We stopped at the courthouse long enough for me to run in and trade the body receipt for a check. Then I stopped my bank and deposited that, going through the drive-through rather than subjecting anyone to the vampire stench that seemed to have seared itself into my pores.

After taking down Rosalind Smith, Helen and Elijah had both opted to go home.

I stopped and vacuumed out my car, then stopped again at a gas station where I filled up my car with gas and picked up a Christmas-tree-shaped air freshener. I followed the instructions and just opened the plastic enough to let some of the scent out.

But that didn't do enough to counteract the vampire stench in my car, so I ripped the plastic off entirely and dropped it on the passenger floorboard.

By the time I got home, I was sneezing from the perfume smell.

I stood in the shower for a half-hour shampooing my hair over and over again. When I finally got out, the vampire smell was gone, though I couldn't tell if it was because of the shampoo and the air freshener or because I had burned away all the hairs inside my nose and couldn't smell anything anymore.

Standing in front of the mirror, I rubbed away the steam and leaned over to peer at myself. Right in the middle of my forehead was a giant bump rapidly

turning a shade of purple that rivaled my hair.

I gingerly touched the bruised lump, and then hissed and pulled my fingers away.

I was definitely going to get a Taser next.

I dressed in blue jeans, a sweater, and tennis shoes having concluded that high-heeled boots were terrible for bounty hunting no matter how badass they looked.

Before I started the car, I put a call through to Riker Kane.

“How are you doing, kiddo?” he asked.

My teeth clenched at the nickname, but I didn’t say anything about it. “Pretty good. We picked up some potentially useful information and are going to check it out.

“Want back up?”

“If you’re not too busy.” I tried to sound completely nonchalant but getting taken to the floor by a peace-disturbing vampire had rattled me a little bit.

“Tell me when and where,” Riker said.

Once I was sure I’d have useful backup, I headed out.

I stopped to pick up Elijah first, who got in my car and started sneezing. “Dear God,” he said, his eyes watering, “what is that smell?”

“Black Ice.” I gestured at the cardboard card hanging from my rearview mirror. “My new air freshener. Smells better than vampire.”

“That’s debatable.” Elijah rolled down his window and stuck his head out for a breath of fresh air.

We stopped to pick up Helen next. She came out dressed like a bank robber—black pants, black combat boots, tight black sweater, and a black knit cap with her blonde curls peeking out from under it.

About halfway to the warehouse, we got caught up in some of the endless construction work that snarled up Dallas traffic on a regular basis.

By the time we exited the interstate, we were already ten minutes later than I told Riker I would be. So I wasn't surprised when we turned onto the road leading to a row of warehouses and caught a glimpse of Riker's giant pickup truck pulled off to one side.

I slid my car up to park behind him, and the three of us got out.

We made our way to the pickup where Riker leaned back against the front bumper, a pair of night vision goggles over his eyes.

"See anything interesting?" I asked quietly.

He shook his head and pushed the goggles up. Then he turned to me, wrinkling his nose as he inhaled. "Is that some kind of new perfume or something?" He asked.

"It's Black Ice air freshener," Elijah supplied helpfully.

I ignored the exchange. "No one going in or out?"

"Not since I've been here," Riker said.

He tugged the night vision goggles back down over his eyes. "What makes you think this place is connected to Savas, anyway?"

I really didn't want to tell him I'd had the werewolf in my dining room and had failed to bring him in. "We talked to his assistant today, and she suggested we check it out. She also said Savas's ex-wife had married a real monster."

Riker made a noncommittal noise then took off the night vision goggles entirely. "Well, then. Let's go check it out."

"He gestured to the two sides of the building. "You take that side. I'll take the north end."

I was glad he'd specified which side was mine—I couldn't have told you which end was north.

"What about us?" Helen asked.

Riker's gaze flickered to her. "You stick with Tessa. Use some of that Army training to do a little recon."

Helen snapped off a salute.

We all split up and headed to the warehouse.

I didn't know exactly what I was supposed to do when I got there, but I figured I could sort it out. If nothing else, I could see if there were any unlocked doors.

We made our way to what I presumed was the south end of the building, moving as quietly as possible. Somehow, even in her high-heeled boots, Helen managed to move more quietly than either Elijah or I did.

Riker, on the other hand, had melted into the night like he'd never been there at all.

I suspected I had a lot to learn about this bounty-hunting business.

On our end of the warehouse was a single door with a dimly shining bulb encased in a wire cage above the door. We hugged the wall making our way to the door, where I rattled the doorknob. Locked.

Set high in the building was a row of windows. None of the panes were broken, and they were all too high for any of us to reach the windows. I was about to move on when the doorknob turned, and the door swung open from inside. I barely bit back a scream.

Riker poked his head out. "No one here," he said. "I think maybe you'll want to come in and see this, though."

He led us in, shining a Maglite flashlight on the floor to lead the way and occasionally flashing it around the building.

The warehouse was lined floor-to-ceiling with boxes and crates in neatly stacked rows.

"How did you get in here?" I asked, automatically pitching my voice low.

"Maybe I shouldn't tell you," Riker said, a grin underlying his voice.

I shook my head. I *definitely* had a lot to learn about being a bounty hunter. Like breaking and entering, for one.

The crate Riker took us to had already had the top pried off, and one of the

boxes inside had been opened.

He reached in and pulled out a book, handing it to me. I peered down at the cover as Riker handed out more of the books and then gave me the flashlight.

The whole thing was written in a foreign language—maybe Latin?—with strange seals and symbols throughout it.

“What is this?” I asked.

“A grimoire,” Riker said. “A book of magic spells.”

“Aren’t these outlawed?” Helen asked.

“Oh, they are,” Riker replied. “And for good reason, too. Once humans figured out magic was real, the last thing we wanted were books explaining how to do it.”

I glanced around the warehouse. “There must be thousands of them here.”

“Dude,” Elijah said. “That’s a lot of magic.”

“Assuming that’s what’s in all the boxes, yeah,” Riker agreed.

“Do you think these belong to Niko?” Elijah asked.

“No clue. But I think we should try to find out.”

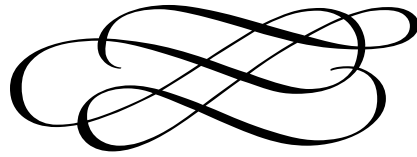
“I agree. But before we leave, I want to take another look around,” I said.

“Have at it,” Riker said, closing the box of books and sealing it back together with the removed tape so no one would know we’d been here.

I pulled out my own keyring flashlight—a poor imitation of Riker’s massive police-style one—and began making my way down the aisles of crates.

I had just turned a corner when a hand reached out and grabbed me, jerking me back behind the nearest stack. I gasped, and Niko Savas dropped his mouth down to cover mine, pulling me up against his hard chest.

# CHAPTER 15



Niko Savas's lips covered mine, his arms wrapping around me and crushing my breasts against his chest.

At first, I was too stunned to respond—and by the time I gathered my wits after being grabbed yet again, the kiss had totally addled my brains.

Niko's mouth started out hard and demanding and then turned soft and coaxing.

His tongue slipped into my mouth, slowly swiping across my tongue as his arms wrapped around me.

My entire body went limp, melting against him. His hand slid up my back, his fingers sliding up into my hair at the base of my neck.

My hands shook, and my heart pounded in my chest at his taste, wild and clean and unbelievably sexy.

A voice echoed in the back of my mind, and it took several seconds for me to finally hear what it was saying.

*Don't let him get away again.*

Right.

Werewolf FTA.

But I didn't change anything I was doing—not immediately, anyway. Instead,



I wound one arm around his neck and pressed myself closer to him.

If he could distract me with a kiss, I could distract him too.

I matched his tongue stroke for stroke, until he made a sound deep in his throat that was something like a growl and tugged me even closer.

That's when I lifted my handcuffs out of my pocket and slapped them onto his wrist.

As soon as the silver chain touched him, Niko's skin began smoking, a scent like burned flesh and fur rising from him.

He jerked away from me and let out a howl. It was the first time I'd actually heard him sound like a werewolf.

The look he cast at me was full of betrayal and hurt, and for an instant, I felt sorry for him again.

From the other end of the warehouse, I heard my crew calling out to me asking if I was okay.

"Over here!" I called out.

Niko took off running, headed in the opposite direction from the voices.

I set out after him, sprinting through the maze of crates.

But he was a werewolf and much faster than I was, so within seconds, I lost him.

I heard footsteps pounding behind me and spun around to find Riker closing in. "What was that?"

"Niko Savas," I said.

He nodded. "Thought it sounded like a werewolf. Which way did he go?"

I spun around in a circle. "No idea. He was headed away from all of us last I saw."

"Are you hurt? Did he get to you?"

*Oh, he got to me all right.*

I shook my head. “I’m not hurt.”

“Stay close to me,” Riker said.

“Where are Helen and Elijah?” I asked, falling into step behind him as he began making his way stealthily through the boxes.

“I told them to stay back there with the books. I have them taking pictures.”

“Did you open more crates?”

Riker gave a short nod. “All of them are full of more of the same.”

Ahead of us, something clattered to the ground. Riker glanced back at me, his fingers to his lips in a shushing motion.

I nodded and tiptoed behind him, though I was pretty sure I would never be as quiet as he was. Or even as quiet as Helen in her high heels, for that matter.

We came to the edge of one of the rows, and Riker put his hand back to tell me to slow down. Then he poked his head out, every muscle of his frame tense, ready to jump back out of harm’s way if necessary.

But then he relaxed and straightened, stepping out into a small open area.

I followed him, moving to stand next to him where he stared down at the ground at my handcuffs.

One of them—the one that hadn’t been on Niko’s wrist—was still in perfect shape.

The other had been twisted into something unrecognizable, part of it still in its original shape, the rest of it curved into a weird parabola.

The cuffs looked like they had been tossed aside and now rested on the floor in front of a door I hadn’t seen earlier—one that now had a gaping hole where the doorknob should’ve been.

Riker pushed the door open and shined his flashlight around outside.

When he came back in, he was shaking his head. “Nothing.”

Elijah wandered up beside me, apparently unwilling to follow Riker's orders to stay put, and surveyed the damage.

"Dude," he said. "That's some serious werewolf strength."

"No shit," I replied.

"If Savas didn't have anything to do with this, then what was he doing here tonight?" Helen asked as the four of us once again stood around an open crate full of grimoires.

"Good question," I muttered, frustrated that Savas had gotten away from me yet again.

I was beginning to think I made a crappy bounty hunter.

"I don't know, but something about this whole situation is off," Riker said.

"Niko's the one who told me to talk to his assistant," I blurted out.

Slowly, Riker turned an incredulous gaze in my direction. "He what?"

"Yeah. He showed up at my house the other night asking me what my connection was to you. Then he told me to talk to his assistant, which led us out here. I don't think it's any coincidence that Niko was here at the same time."

"You are going to get yourself killed," Riker said, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

He was probably right.

But I was determined that if I lived through this, I was going to get that \$50,000 bounty.

"I'm going to need new handcuffs," I said changing the subject.

"I think what you need to do is quit going after Niko Savas," Riker said.

“No.” I caught Riker’s gaze with mine and held it. “I think he didn’t kill his ex-wife and her husband.”

“Your job is not to prove guilt or innocence,” Riker said, his tone stern. “It’s to pick up the FTA and bring them in.”

“Why can’t I do both?”

He turned away with a muttered curse. “Because, Tessa, that’s a good way to get yourself murdered right alongside the other victims.”

Part of me knew he was right, but I wasn’t ready to admit it. So I pulled out my phone and opened up my Amazon account. I typed in the search then clicked on a link. “What about these?” I asked Riker, holding the phone out for him to peer at the screen. “Are these handcuffs any good?”

“Holy fuck,” he sighed. “At least promise me you won’t do any investigating or attempting to take Niko in without talking to me first?”

I frowned, unwilling to give up any part of my autonomy.

Well?” I demanded. “Are the handcuffs good?”

Riker took my phone from me and scrolled through the description of the cuffs.

“They’ll do. Just don’t expect to use them to contain an enraged werewolf.” He handed the phone back. “Now. Promise me.” Riker crossed his arms over his chest, which caused his biceps to pop impressively, and stared me down.

“Fine,” I said, sounding like a recalcitrant teenager. “I’ll call you if I learn anything else.”

He turned to Helen and Elijah. “You two, as well.”

“Oh, hell yes,” Helen said. “I’m not going after a crazed werewolf without some muscle to back me up.”

And God knew Riker Kane was some serious muscle.

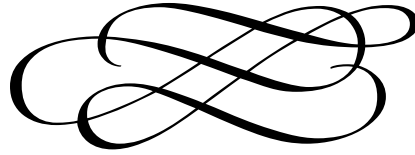
“Good,” Riker said. “You three get out of here. I’m going to call a contact of mine at the police department and let him know what we found. Rather, I’m going to tell him I found it all by myself.”

We turned to leave, but on my way out, I reached down and snagged one of the books from the crate.

I didn't have any real reason to do it—just owning the damn thing was illegal—but I figured if I got picked up with it, I would claim that I found it when I was hunting for Savas. Which was, after all, the truth.

Just not the whole truth.

# CHAPTER 16



I slept until almost noon the next day.

Chasing down werewolves can really take it out of a girl.

Besides, I didn't know what I was going to do for the rest of the day.

I made my way downstairs and was pouring myself a cup of coffee when my mother came into the kitchen from gathering the mail. She flipped through the envelopes and handed one to me frowning at the return address. "What is that?"

I glanced down at it and blinked. The return address was from KT-LOOB, and it took me a few seconds to place the name.

Right. The group trying to get dildos fully legalized in Texas.

It shouldn't have taken me that long to figure it out since there was a small logo of an abstract penis next to the name.

No wonder my mother had looked so confused.

"Nothing, *Mami*," I said.

She gave me a suspicious look. "I don't believe you when you sound like that. You're lying."

I laughed. "It's just junk mail." To prove my point, I tossed it into the trash can under the sink. "See? Nothing important."

I had just closed the cabinet when my phone rang. I picked it up from the countertop and glanced at it.

Riker Kane.

“Hey,” he said when I answered. “I thought you’d want to hear what happened after you left last night.”

“Absolutely.” I walked out of the kitchen, away from my mother.

“The Dallas PD came in and sealed off the warehouse. They’re going to confiscate all those books.” He paused. “Well, all except two.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked innocently.

“Yeah.” I could hear the grin in his voice. “The one I took and the one you took.”

Damn. He noticed everything, didn’t he?

“I thought we might need it.”

Riker's deep, cheerful laugh made me smile in response. “Do you want to go with me to have it authenticated?”

“Definitely. I’m in,” I said.

“Great. I’ll be there to pick you up in half an hour.”

He hung up without saying goodbye, and I stared at the screen for a few seconds before drinking the rest of my coffee in a few fast gulps. Then I raced upstairs to get dressed in jeans and a sweater.

I stuck my hand in my pocket, where I found a Tootsie Pop. I hadn’t worn these jeans since Halloween at Elijah’s. I shook my head and shoved the lollipop back into my pocket.

I desperately needed to do laundry.

When I came back downstairs a little less than half an hour later, Riker was sitting in the kitchen with my mother. She was batting her eyelashes at him, coming closer to flirting with him than I had ever seen her do with anyone.

“You ready to go?” I asked Riker, eager to get him away from my family. If he wasn’t careful, they would start making plans to marry us off without either of our consent.

“Absolutely.” Riker turned to my mom. “It was lovely to meet you, Ms. Fury.”

“It’s always so nice to meet Tess’s friends,” she said.

As if I hadn’t had two other friends at the house eating breakfast with us just the morning before. Then again, a stoner and a drag queen probably didn’t rank as “real” friends with my mother.

I rolled my eyes and gestured for Riker to lead the way out. But before I could follow him, my mother grabbed me by the wrist and yanked me back into the kitchen.

“Ouch. Why did you do that?” I whined, rubbing my wrist.

“This is not nothing, Tessa Clara Fury,” she said, picking up the mailer from KT-LOOB and waving it under my nose.

“Why did you dig that out of the trash?”

She pulled the paper out of the envelope and snapped it at me. “Have you read this?”

“No. I threw it away. But clearly you’ve read it.”

“You coming, Tessa?” Riker called from the entryway.

“Be right there,” I replied.

“We are not done discussing this,” my mother threatened.

“Fine, but I don’t see any reason for us to spend more time on it. Whenever you’re done being outraged, just throw it away again, would you?”

“Ay, *Dios mío*,” my mother said, throwing her hands up in the air.

But I noticed she did not toss the mailer back into the trash.

Once Riker and I were in his truck, he headed east.



“Where are we going?” I asked.

“A place just outside a small town about an hour’s drive from here,” he said. “I know a witch out there—I’m hoping she can help decipher whatever’s in this book. I figure once we know that, we will have a better idea of what it is we’re dealing with.”

Annetta Landry lived in a small A-frame house in the middle of nowhere down a country road that dead-ended at her driveway.

When Riker knocked on her door, a woman who could have been anywhere between seventy-five and a hundred and fifty opened the door. She had thin, frail shoulders and bright green eyes sparkling with intelligence. Her hair was pure white, cut close to her head in waves, and she wore enormous gold hoop earrings that overwhelmed her face.

Other than the earrings, nothing about her fit the stereotype of a witch.

She wore knit pants and a T-shirt topped with a zip-up sweatshirt hoodie and orthopedic shoes. “Riker, my boy,” she said. Her voice quavered with age. “Come in. Come in.”

He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “Netta, this is Tessa Fury. She’s working with me.”

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Landry,” I said in my politest voice.

“Lordy, girl. Please don’t *Ms. Landry* me. Call me Netta. All my friends do.” She shuffled into the house, and we followed her. “Come on back to the kitchen,” she said. “I’ve got some tea in the kettle, and my cards have been calling to me all morning.”

Her cards had been calling?

We followed her back through the small space. Her kitchen was bright and airy with white tiles and turquoise curtains. A small Formica table barely had

space for the three of us, and Netta poured out cups of hot tea for us all.

Then she took her seat and pulled out a deck of cards. She began shuffling them. I'd have expected tarot cards, but instead, she had a pack of regular red and black playing cards, the kind that come fifty-two to a deck.

She could have been about to deal us in for a hand of poker.

Instead, she began laying out the cards one at a time, flipping them over a long row that curved around from left to right and then doubled back on itself like a snake.

“Oh, look at this.” She pointed at the cards on the table as if I could tell anything from them. “You two are about to come into some big money, seems like.”

I blinked, glancing at Riker.

“That’s always the hope,” he said easily.

“Oh, sugar, you’ve got some kind of danger lurking around you. Like a dog? Either of you have a dog?”

We both shook our heads. She went back to studying her cards, and I mouthed a word at Riker. Werewolf?

He shrugged. Netta glanced up at us. “No,” she said. “It’s not a wolf. I’m definitely seeing a dog here.”

My eyes grew wide. The old woman hadn’t been looking at us, and I had not made a sound.

“To answer your question—the one you’re really here to ask, not whatever it is you want me to look at—that boy you’re after, the one with all the money? Yeah, he’s innocent.” She peered down at the spread of cards in front of her, then chuckled. “Or at least, he’s not guilty of the crime he’s been accused of.” Her gaze flickered up at me. “You already know he’s not so innocent.”

My cheeks burned, and beside me, Riker snorted.

Netta turned on him and wagged one bony finger. “Don’t you go getting all high and mighty, neither. You’re not so innocent. We both know you break

the laws you're paid to enforce.”

“Don't give all my secrets away, Netta.” There was real affection in Riker's voice.

“Now,” she said, wagging her fingers in a *give it here* motion, “let me see that book you want me to take a look at.”

Riker crossed his arms over his chest. “I never said it was a book.”

“You never had to. You know that.”

Riker produced the book from the duffel bag he'd carried in, sliding it across the table to Netta. She blinked down at it. Then she gingerly opened the cover and flipped through several pages. “Hand me my glasses from over there on that counter, would you sweetheart?” she said to me.

“Of course.” I jumped up and retrieved the thick lenses, wondering how Netta had read the cards—how she'd even seen the cards—without them.

“I don't have to see my cards to read them, child,” she said.

Okay. This woman was definitely what my mother would've called *una bruja de verdad*. A true witch.

“That's what I thought,” she said once she had her glasses on and had turned a few more pages. “You brought me a dark grimoire.”

“I thought that's what it probably was,” Riker said. “I wanted to make sure.”

“Well, consider yourself sure.”

“What does it say?” I asked.

Netta turned another page. “This is a very specific grimoire,” she said. “Most are collections of spells, potions, general guidelines for doing magic, stuff like that.”

She went back to studying the pages.

“But this one?” Riker prompted.

“This one...” Netta's voice trailed off. “Ah, yes.” She tapped her forefinger

on a page. “This is that dog I was warning you about.”

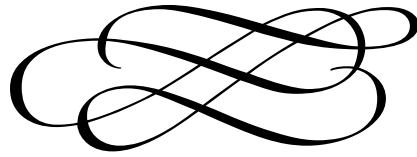
She looked up from the book, her eyes magnified behind the thick lenses.

“This is not your average, everyday grimoire.”

“What is it?” I asked, ready to crawl out of my own skin with anxiety.

“This one is designed to help the caster summon a hellhound.”

# CHAPTER 17



“So what’s next?” I asked Riker as we pulled up in front of my parents’ house.

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel again, a habit I was beginning to recognize as a signal of his anxiety—or at least a sign that he was trying to figure out what to do next.

“I’m not sure yet. Let me ask around, see what I can find out about and who might be summoning hellhounds. And why.”

“We are thinking that Amon and Darlene Brandt were killed by hellhounds, not werewolves, right?”

“It’s certainly possible,” Riker agreed.

“And that would mean Niko Savas didn’t do it. He’s innocent.”

“I’d assume so. As long as he wasn’t the one summoning the hellhounds, of course.”

A sigh of relief escaped me. I hadn’t expected to be quite so pleased to find out that Niko was truly not a monster—or at least, not the kind of monster who’d kill his ex-wife.

I would’ve been horrified to realize that I had enjoyed a murderer’s kiss quite so much.

“Call me if you find anything new?” I pushed open the passenger door of the pickup.

“Will do,” Riker said.

I bounced into the house, my steps lighter than they had been in several days.

“Tessa, *mija!*” my mother called from the kitchen. “You have some packages in here.”

I pushed through the dining room doors. “I thought you got the mail already today.”

“These were delivered later. One’s from Amazon.”

“Excellent,” I exclaimed, pouncing on the packages.

The first one was in a small box, and I took some scissors from the drawer to cut open the tape on it.

When I pulled my brand-new handcuffs out of the box, my mother shook her head. “Your Uncle Carlos called me to tell me what you’re doing. This monster-hunting business is a terrible idea, Tessa. You’re not a police officer.”

“No, I’m not. But I am a bounty hunter. As of yesterday, in fact, I’m officially a bounty hunter. I captured my first bail-skipper and turned her in for money.”

“I thought you were going to be an art museum curator.”

I shook my head. “Turns out there aren’t so many job openings for art museum curators.”

She rolled her eyes. “What’s in the other package? More police gear?”

I frowned down at it. “I don’t know. I didn’t order anything else.”

Turning the package over, I found my name and address printed on the label attached to the padded envelope.

But there was no evidence of the package having been shipped. No stamps, no barcodes, nothing.

Just my name and address.

I used the scissors to snip open the top of the envelope. I popped the package open and peered down into it.

Inside was a piece of folded notebook paper and a small cell phone.

Frowning, I pulled out the note.

***My number's programmed already. Call me. ~N. S.***

Niko Savas had sent me a cell phone.

“Well? What is it?”

“Nothing important, *Mami*. Just work stuff.”

As soon as I got that \$50,000, I was getting my own apartment. I needed to move someplace where no one would be peering over my shoulder every time I opened my mail.

I left the cell phone in the padded envelope and gathered it and my handcuffs to take upstairs with me.

In my room, I shut the door behind me and stared around at my surroundings.

Nothing had changed in the almost five years that had passed since I'd graduated from high school.

White particle board furniture with a hot pink comforter and matching curtains proclaimed my status as a girly girl.

Which I was—I just didn't want my childhood decorations defining me.

With a sigh, I threw myself down atop my twin daybed and pulled the cell phone out of the envelope.

When I turned it on, the phone was completely charged up, and there was one phone number in the contacts.

I punched the button to put the call through.

“I see you got my package.” Niko spoke without greeting me.

“What do you want?”

His laugh was dry, laced with sarcasm. “What do I want? I want my life back. I want everyone to know that I did not kill Darlene and Amon.”

“How are we going to do that?”

There was a pause, and I realized I had said we.

Guess I was all in now.

“Did you figure out what those books were at the warehouse?” Niko asked.

“Yep. Grimoires with spells for summoning hellhounds,” I said.

“I knew it.”

“No you didn’t—you used me to figure it out.”

Niko chuckled. “Okay. You’re right. But I was pretty sure they were being used to summon demons of some sort.”

“So what did Darlene and Amon Brandt have to do with that?”

I heard the reluctance in his pause.

“You might as well tell me,” I said. “If you want my help, I need all the pertinent information.”

“I’d rather tell you in person,” Niko said. “Tonight?”

This time, I was the one pausing reluctantly.

“Fine,” I finally said. “But no more grabbing me in the dark, okay?”

“Agreed. Meet me at the end of your street. Eight o’clock?”

“I’ll see you then.”

“And come alone this time. If Riker Kane sees me, he’ll drag my ass in before I’m ready to go.”

“What about the rest of my team?”

Niko snorted. “That’s not a team. That’s a comedy troupe. And while Riker



might take me in, your other two friends are equally likely to get me arrested—not because they plan to, but because they stumble into it.”

I suspected I was just as likely to stumble into getting him arrested, but I didn't tell Niko that.

“Fine. Alone, then,” I said. “I'll meet you at the corner at eight.”

I hung up then stared at the phone in my hand.

Uncomfortable words like *aiding* and *abetting* flickered through my mind.

But if anyone asked, I would simply say I'd been drawing Niko out in order to capture him and turn him in for the bounty.

And it wasn't entirely untrue—after all, I did plan to take him in.

Just as soon as I had enough evidence to prove that he wasn't responsible for the murders he'd been accused of.

Elijah called me about seven o'clock that evening. “What are we doing tonight?” he asked.

“Nothing.” It wasn't a complete lie since we weren't doing anything. I was.

“Fine. Call me tomorrow so we can figure out what's next on our bounty hunting to-do list?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Because I could use some cash,” he continued. “Maybe we could go after another one of those lower-level skips?”

Yeah. I was guessing Elijah was out of weed and wanted to replenish his stash. Hence the need for money.

“Sounds good,” I said. “Why don't you search through the paranormal FTA list and see what's there that looks promising?” That ought to keep him busy

for a while.

“I’ll call you if I see any,” Elijah said.

“Don’t call. I mean—” I backtracked on my knee-jerk reaction. “Just text me the information. I’m planning to go to bed early tonight.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Elijah said.

After we hung up, I changed into a dark blue sweater and pulled a puffy coat over it.

“I’m going out for a couple of hours,” I called out as I made my way down the stairs taking them two at a time. I didn’t wait for either of my parents to answer. They would have too many questions, and really, it wasn’t any of their business.

My mother might hate my job right now, but when I came home with \$50,000 in the bank, she’d get over that dislike.

I hoped.

When I got to the corner of my street, I slowed to a halt, peering around.

Niko loomed out of the dark, and I unlocked my car door for him to get in.

He wore dark clothing and a black knit cap much like the one Helen had worn earlier. He tugged it over his ears and slouched down in my car seat.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“This address,” Niko said, handing me a slip of paper. “I think they’re going to be summoning more hellhounds tonight.”

I tapped the address into my phone for directions and followed them to a row of rundown buildings about twenty minutes away.

I drove past our destination and pulled into a driveway several buildings down.

The whole area had seen better days. It looked like it had been a thriving business strip in the 1950s or 60s, but at least half the buildings were entirely empty now. The other half housed a mix of businesses—an auto repair shop,

a used clothing store, a restaurant with hand-lettered signs advertising daily specials.

Niko and I got out of my car and quietly closed the doors. I locked the car behind us, flinching at the sound of the beep echoing in the cold night air.

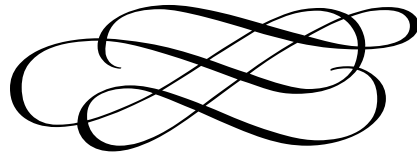
“This way,” Niko said, taking my hand and leading me around to the back of the row of buildings. Werewolves’ night vision beat the hell out of humans’. We made our way through the scraggly plants scattered in the dirt to the rear of the address he’d given me.

“Where did you get this information?” I whispered.

“I still have friends with connections,” he said cryptically. “Once we’re inside, no more talking.”

I nodded, my heart pounding, and followed Niko through the back door.

# CHAPTER 18



I nside, the building was split into a few rooms. I suspected it had been a body shop or some other kind of mechanics' business. The floors were concrete slabs painted a dark gray, and the scent of grease and motor oil still lingered in the air, probably having soaked into the walls.

We were inside what had once upon a time been a storeroom of some sort with an open door leading into the rest of the building.

A flickering light shined through the door and spilled partway into the room Niko and I stood in.

As I watched, the light shining from the other room brightened, flickering even more, and I realized it was some sort of fire.

I definitely needed to see what we were dealing with.

Several windows on the back side of the building had been smashed out, and broken glass littered the floor. Cold wind whipped through the windows and crevices in the walls, setting up an eerie, low-pitched, whining howl.

I took a step forward and came down on a pile of glass shards that crunched underneath my feet.

A male voice came from the other room. "What was that?"

Niko and I froze.

“Want me to go check it out?” another voice, also male, said.

“No. Probably just the wind,” the first voice replied.

I slowly blew out a silent sigh of relief.

The last thing I wanted was to get captured by whoever these bad guys were.

And I was certain they were bad guys because it had just occurred to me that these were almost certainly the people who were responsible for Darlene and Amon Brandt’s murders.

I glanced over at Niko. His eyes were glowing that bright werewolf blue.

Carefully, I slid my phone out of my pocket and opened the camera, setting it to record.

Whatever happened here, I wanted a video record of it.

In the other room, the voices got back to what they had been doing before I had interrupted them by stepping on glass.

“What’s next?” A third voice, this one female, asked.

“Yeah,” the second voice said. “All our books were confiscated. How are we going to bring in new recruits now?”

“Don’t worry about that—I can get enough of the books back to get us started until we can get more printed.”

Niko and I glanced at each other frowning.

The books were in police custody. Who would be able to get them back?

I really wanted to get a look at whoever we were dealing with.

Slowly, carefully, I slid my sneakered foot forward, checking the floor for glass underneath me before I committed to a step.

I picked my way over to the wall and flattened myself against it sliding closer to the entrance to the next room.

Niko slipped up behind me, giving me a nod when I turned around to glance at him.

I scooted forward a few more steps until I could hold my hand out to the side and point my camera into the next room. My arm remained shrouded in darkness, so I hoped no one in the room would be able to see it but that my phone's camera would still be able to catch what was going on in the next room.

“What about Savas?” the second male voice said. “You promised he would take the fall for everything.”

“And he's still on the run,” the first voice said. “We can still blame him for anything that goes wrong.”

Something about that voice sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it.

I'd have to watch the video recording later to see if I recognized whoever it was.

“Hell of a lot of good that'll do us if we're dead,” the female said. “You saw what happened to Darlene and Amon.”

I glanced at Niko in surprise. This was news to me—whatever had happened to Niko's ex and her husband had been an accident, not an attack.

Niko's eyes were still glowing, but I could see his brow furrow as he worked through all the new information we were getting.

“Nothing's going to go wrong,” the first voice said. “We have a summoning circle inside a containment circle. See? This one is the same one that Amon used. But we've added this one right here.” I heard something tapping on the floor.

“I don't think I trust a couple of chalk lines to contain one of those monsters,” the woman said.

“Me either,” the second male said. “I think we ought to use one of those crates—summon the hellhound so it's inside the crate when it gets here.”

Taking a deep breath, I risked a glance into the room.

Three hooded figures stood around a double circle containing intricate symbols chalked on the floor. I could make out a pentagram in one of them along with some arcane imagery that looked an awful lot like some of the

symbols in the books we'd found in the warehouse.

Lit candles encircled both the symbols and the people.

I couldn't see their faces—and with that much light behind them, they shouldn't be able to see past it into the dark room Niko and I stood in.

Or at least, I hoped they wouldn't.

“Fine,” said the first voice, more irritated than before. “Put the dog crate in the middle of the summoning circle. We'll see what happens. But I can already tell you it's not going to work.”

*God, I recognize that voice. Where from?*

The sound of a wire cage rattling as they moved it into place filtered back to our darkened hiding place.

“Ready?” the first voice asked.

“I am,” the woman said.

“Yep,” said the second man.

“Good. Then let's get going on this. I need to get home.”

Holy fuck. They really were about to summon a hellhound.

I didn't know much about hellhounds, but I had spent a little time the night before looking them up.

Vicious, demonic, hard to control once they were fully embodied on Earth.

Surely we had enough information now to exonerate Niko for the Brandts' killing. Whatever was going on here was dangerous—and not only, I suspected, for the people doing the hellhound-summoning, but for others as well.

The thought of turning out uncontrollable, vicious monsters on the general population made my stomach clench.

We definitely needed to do something about this whole scheme, no matter what it involved.

So when Niko touched my arm and tilted his head toward the door we'd come in through, I shook my head no and pointed at my phone, still recording as the people in the next room began chanting.

More than anything, I wanted to pull the phone back toward me and look at the recording I'd gotten so far. I was dying to know whose voice I recognized in there. But I didn't want to stop recording. I was certain that one continuous recording would play better in court than several shorter ones even if it was obvious that they had been taken in the same place.

And even more than that, we needed to make sure we got clear images of their faces.

So instead of following Niko's suggestion to leave, I scooted a little closer to the doorway, hoping to catch a glimpse of what was going on in the other room.

I flattened my back against the wall and slid sideways along it until I was right next to the door frame.

I listened to the chanting for a moment, trying to determine what would be the best time for me to sneak a second peek.

Suddenly, the light from the other room began sparkling, and crackling noises echoed through the building.

This would be a good time, I decided.

I leaned around quickly, taking one look inside the room before pulling back and flattening myself against the wall again.

No one started shouting that they needed to chase me, so I assumed I hadn't been seen.

But I had seen them.

I didn't recognize either the man who presumably owned the second voice or the woman, but I definitely knew the first man I'd heard speaking.

Officer Callahan.

The man who had issued the paranormal bounty hunter business license to



Elijah and me.

The officer who had congratulated me on bringing in my first FTA.

I had to fight back a curse.

A Dallas police officer was involved in whatever had gotten Darlene and Amon Brandt killed by hellhounds.

Was he the one who had convinced the lead detective on the Brandts' case to go after Niko?

That just pissed me off.

Bad enough that Callahan was doing something dangerous and illegal. Worse, he'd arranged to have someone else—someone who was completely innocent of any wrongdoing—hunted down for a crime he didn't commit.

I glanced up in time to see Niko skirt around the light spilling into the room we occupied and come up against the door frame on the side opposite me.

Now we bracketed the door. No one was getting through this door without going past us.

The chanting continued in the next room, voices rising and falling in an odd cadence, speaking a language I didn't recognize—but one I suspected I would be able to find in the grimoire we'd discovered.

Niko leaned around and peeked in the same way I had moments before.

When he came back up against the wall, his expression had gone completely cold, and his eyes were glowing even more than before.

I wondered if he recognized anyone in there.

If we were going to do anything about this, we were going to need backup.

I still didn't want to stop recording what was going on now.

And I certainly didn't want to say anything aloud to Niko—the last thing I wanted was to be overheard by the trio in the next room.

That's when I remembered the phone that Niko had sent me. It was in my

front jeans pocket along with my keys.

Of course, I couldn't remember Riker's number, even though he would definitely be my first choice for help. And I didn't want to call 911—the police would arrest Niko the instant they saw him. Besides, there was no telling whether Callahan would have connections to the cops who showed up.

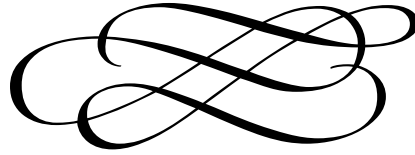
That left only one person whose number I knew by heart. One person I trusted to back me up no matter what.

With my free hand, I pulled out the extra phone and typed in Elijah's number, then sent a text.

I started with "It's Tessa." Then I gave the address and added another sentence.

***Tell Riker we need help.***

# CHAPTER 19



As I slid the burner phone back into my pocket, the chanting ramped up yet again in the other room, and the air around us grew heavy and thick, the pressure increasing around us like it does before a thunderstorm.

Only this storm was indoors.

Lightning snapped and crackled, hitting the floor with bolts of white-hot power.

The chanting died out, and Callahan said, “Get ready.”

“Oh, shit. Here it comes,” the second man said.

Inside the room, what sounded like another lightning bolt hit with a sizzling crack, and the woman yelped.

“I told you that cage wasn’t going to do any good,” Callahan said.

I risked another peek into the room, hoping they were all focused on the sigil in the middle of the floor.

A large metal dog crate had been knocked over onto its side, the wires still smoking where the magic lightning bolt had struck it.

“Everybody move back,” Callahan ordered, and instinctively, I followed his directions too, stepping back away from the door.

But I couldn’t quit watching.

Directly above the pentagram, a swirling cloud of black and purple smoke twirled, sucking up all the energy in the room. It whirled faster and faster until a tiny point dipped down, looking like a Texas tornado dropping from the clouds.

It bounced up and down, coming out of the cloud several times—once again behaving just like the tornadoes I'd seen.

The miniature whirlwind touched down on the cement floor, letting out an enormous boom of thunder. I clamped my hands to my ears, then remembered I was holding a phone in one of them, supposedly recording this. I fumbled it back into position, unable to look away from what was happening inside the next room.

This time, I wanted to keep watching, so I moved outside the circle of light and continued recording.

Clouds and dust flew around the room, and the three people inside covered their eyes.

When it cleared, a giant beast stood in the center of the symbols.

Or at least, it stood where the symbols had been.

The woman had been right—they had been written in chalk, and the whirlwind had blown them away.

In their place were creatures shaped like something between a hyena and a Doberman pinscher.

Had it been standing next to me, its head would have reached almost to my chest. It was that big. Even next to Riker, it probably would've come well past his waist.

The beast was covered in dark black fur, short and spiky all over. But what really set it off from other canine-type animals was the fact that it had glowing red symbols shining all over its body.

Some of the same symbols that had been marked on the floor.

Even as I watched, though, the symbols faded away like embers dying in a fire.

The hellhound glanced around at the people in the room with it.

That's when they figured out that none of their containment plans had worked, when everyone in the room seemed to suddenly realize that they were standing in a circle around a vicious monster with nothing between it and them.

"Fuck this," the second man said, taking several steps toward the door leading out of the far side of the room.

The hellhound fixed its gaze on him, and the man turned to dash away.

The hound bounded after him, taking a leap and landing in the middle of the man's back. He went down with a screech that was cut short by a loud crack.

The man didn't move again, not even when the hellhound grasped his neck in its jaws and bit out an enormous chunk of skin and bone.

The woman and I gasped at the same time, and the hellhound turned slowly, searching for the source of the noise.

The woman had her back to the room Niko and I were in, so when she began backing away from the hellhound, she moved directly toward me.

That was it, I decided. It was time to get out of here. I had enough evidence to prove what had probably happened to Darlene and Damon Brandt. They'd been involved in this group—a cult, maybe? And when they'd attempted to summon their own hellhound, it had attacked and killed them, leaving the remains of what looked remarkably like a werewolf kill.

Enough to get Niko arrested for their murders.

I gestured frantically to Niko, motioning that we should leave. He nodded, and we started toward the door.

In the other room, Callahan had pulled out a shock stick and was using it to try to convince the hellhound to move away from the woman.

In my haste, I forgot to watch where I stepped, and once again, my foot crunched down on glass.

This time, the humans in the other room didn't hear it.

But the hellhound did.

It had been circling the woman and Callahan, trying to find an opening to attack.

But when my foot landed on the glass, its head snapped up and its gaze focused directly on me through the door.

I froze, every instinct I had telling me to hide, to make myself as tiny and unobtrusive as possible.

My muscles locked up and my breath froze in my chest.

For the first time ever, I truly understood what it meant to be prey.

The hellhound's eyes turned bright orange, glowing as fiercely as Niko's did.

By the time my fight-or-flight instinct kicked in, it was too late. With a reverberating growl, the hellhound leaped through the doorway, slamming into my chest and knocking me backward onto the floor.

The monster's razor-sharp claws sliced into me, ripping through my clothes and skin with the pain so intense that for an instant, I didn't feel it at all—and once the sensation kicked in, it felt more like freezing cold than agony.

I tried to gasp, but all the air had been knocked out of me.

The creature on top of me threw its head back and let out a ferocious roar.

Its teeth caught the light from the other room, glinting as saliva dripped off its fangs.

My vision closed in until all I could see was the demonic animal that was going to kill me.

It opened its mouth wide, and I couldn't even close my eyes to look away.

I was going to watch as it ripped my throat out. That was going to be the last thing I ever saw.

Suddenly, the door Niko and I had used to enter the building slammed open, sending a gust of freezing cold air skittering through the room taking tiny glass shards with it.

The hellhound's head jerked toward the door, then down toward my face, and I finally began to fight back.

"Get the fuck off her, you hell-beast," Helen Heels's voice rang through the room, and the next thing I knew, her whip had snaked out and wrapped around the hellhound's neck and jerked it off my chest.

At the same moment, a flying arrow of black fur with glowing blue eyes shot over me, knocking the hellhound off its feet tumbling away with it across the floor.

I scrambled away from where I'd been sitting, coming to rest against the wall.

The entire front of my body was covered in blood. It made me dizzy just to look at it.

Then again, I might've been dizzy anyway.

Callahan and the woman stood in the doorway, mouths agape, as they watched Niko in his werewolf form fighting the hellhound.

Elijah rushed to my side and knelt down next to me. "I called 911," he said. "Just stay with me, okay?"

*Jesus. Do I look that bad?*

I guessed I did.

Callahan and the woman glanced at each other, then turned as one and dashed toward the exit on the other side of the room where they'd summoned the hellhound.

"Get them," I said weakly, raising my hand to point. "Especially him."

Helen gave a nod and took off after them, getting her whip ready as she went.

The back door slammed open again, and Riker strode through. He glanced around, taking everything in. I followed his gaze.

Elijah knelt beside me, holding one hand. Niko stood over the unmoving hellhound, his lupine muzzle coated in blood.

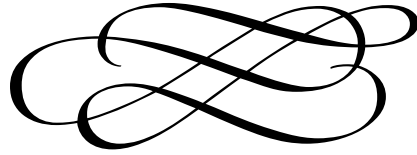
“Bad guys. That way,” I rasped out, pointing toward the other room.

Riker nodded and took off in the same direction Helen had gone, leaving me sprawled across a concrete floor in a room with a blood-covered werewolf, a dead hellhound, and my best friend.

I leaned my head back against the wall, and everything went black.



## CHAPTER 20



*T*welve years ago, the supernatural world revealed itself to the rest of us. Vampires, werewolves, fairies—all real.

*Twelve days ago, I accidentally took a job as a supernatural bounty hunter tracking down the worst of the things that go bump in the night.*

*Twelve hours ago, I turned in my first supernatural FTA.*

*And twelve minutes ago, I'm pretty sure I died.*

When I regained consciousness the first time, I found myself reciting those facts to myself. Only later did I realize they weren't all true. It hadn't been twelve days since I'd started hunting down Niko Savas. And it had been more than twelve hours since I'd turned in Rosalind Smith.

It's funny what your brain will tell you when it thinks it's dying.

The second time, I woke to the sound of EMTs working on me, calling ahead to the hospital to let them know they were coming in with a real emergency.

Then they started doing something to my chest, and I blacked out again.

The next time I came to, I was strapped to a gurney in the back of an ambulance with Elijah sitting on a bench next to me.

I reached up and tugged at the oxygen mask over my face.

"You need to leave that where it is," a female EMT told me.

I pulled it away from my face, anyway, lifting my head to stare intently at Elijah. “Niko?” I managed to croak out.

“Riker told him to leave,” Helen said, leaning into my line of sight. “He didn’t want your werewolf to get arrested before we sorted out what happened there tonight.”

I nodded and rested my head back onto the gurney, relieved that Niko wasn’t going to prison yet —and never would be if I had my way.

That reminded me.

“My phone?” I gasped, this time speaking through the mask.

Elijah held it up. It was covered in blood that someone had attempted to wipe away. “I have it. Niko says it has all the information we need on it.”

I wanted to ask what had happened to Callahan and his partner, but I’d used all my strength checking on Niko.

The next two days were a blur of waking up in the hospital just in time to get another shot of painkiller and go back to sleep.

When I finally woke up enough to announce that I didn’t want any more drugs, the nurse at my bedside grinned. “That’s a good thing, because you are just about done getting any.”

Two hours later, everything had worn off, and I was wishing I hadn’t made that pronouncement.

But another nurse came in, and when I told her I was in pain, she nodded. “The doctor wants us to start stepping you down from the heavy-duty stuff, but I can definitely get you something else. A pill this time.”

“I would really appreciate that.”

“It’ll take about twenty minutes to kick in, and that’s about when I’ll be back

to help you get up and walk around.”

Okay. I knew I must be getting better, because the idea of walking somehow managed to seem like both something I ought to do and something I really did not want to try yet.

The nurse had just left when my parents came into the room.

“*Oy, mija,*” my mother cried out, following that with a spate of Spanish so fast I could barely keep up.

“I’m okay, *Mami.* Quit fussing.”

She leaned over and took my face in her hands, kissing it several times. When she pulled away, her cheeks were wet with tears.

I glanced up at my father, hoping he would back me up in my request for her to calm down.

But his eyes were damp, too. “You almost didn’t make it, sweetheart,” he said.

Damn. Had it really been that bad?

I guessed so since Daniel Fury did not cry. Not ever.

Except, apparently, when his daughter was recovering from an almost-mortal injury inflicted by a hellhound.

“Your friends are out in the hall,” he said. “Do you want to see them?”

“Yes, please.” I desperately wanted to find out what had happened after I’d been mauled.

Once my parents left, I carefully lifted the neck of my hospital gown to stare down at my chest.

It was wrapped in bandages, so I couldn’t tell how bad it was.

“You’re definitely going to have some battle scars after this,” Riker Kane’s voice came from the doorway.

“Great,” I said dryly. “Just what I’ve always wanted.”

“Glad to see your sense of humor is still intact.”

He came across the room and perched on the side of my bed. “How are you feeling?”

“I hurt. The nurse promised me she’d bring me some painkillers soon.”

He nodded. “Good.”

“I assume Elijah contacted you the other night? Tell me what happened after you got there,” I said, leaning back against my pillow and closing my eyes.

“You were a mess when I arrived. And Niko had shifted, meeting the hellhound with his own inner beast.”

“I remember Helen using her whip to yank the hellhound off my chest, and then Niko killing it. What happened after that?”

“I went after Freddy Callahan and Louise Bradford. They’re under arrest, currently awaiting a bail hearing.”

“Louise Bradford. Is that the woman?”

“Yeah. She works with Callahan. They came up with some plan to train hellhounds and then use them to knock over banks or something.”

“Didn’t work all that well, did it?” I asked.

“Not at all.”

Riker leaned in and cupped my cheek in one hand. “When you get out of here, give me a call. If you’re going to keep doing this work, you need to train with me. I can’t stand the thought of you dying.”

“Um. Okay.” I was trying to figure out what to say next when Riker leaned in closer and brushed his lips against mine.

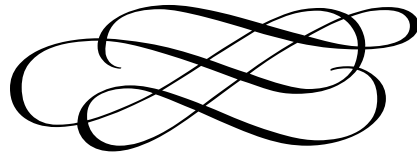
It was a gentle kiss—but a real one, complete with tongue and everything.

And it made my head spin.

I knew what to say even less when he pulled away than I had before. But it didn’t matter, because Riker simply gave me a wink, said, “Call me,” and

was gone before my dizziness had cleared.

# CHAPTER 21



**B**y the time I woke up the next morning, Niko Savas was once again all over the news.

I turned on the television after I picked up my phone and saw a headline announcing that all charges against Niko had been dropped. The first image that popped up was Riker Kane standing with Niko giving an interview.

“That son of a bitch,” I muttered. I used the controls in the hospital bed to sit up, then swung my feet to the floor.

But when I tried to stand, a sharp pain shot through my abdomen, and I groaned. Clutching my midsection, I sank back down to a seated position.

“Girlfriend,” Helen said, sweeping into the room, “what on Earth are you trying to do?”

“Should you even be out of bed?” Elijah asked as he followed Helen into my hospital room.

“Have you seen this bullshit?” I picked up the television remote and turned up the volume.

“... like to thank Riker Kane and his team for their assistance in tracking down the true killers,” Niko was saying.

“Riker Kane’s team?” I sputtered. “I was the one Niko kept contacting, not Riker.” I glared at the television screen. “And that son of a bitch kissed me.”

“Oh, really?” Helen asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Which one?” Elijah asked.

I frowned and leaned back in my bed, pulling the blanket up over me. “Um... Both of them, actually.”

Helen and Elijah both cracked up laughing, and I crossed my arms over my chest. “Not that it matters,” I muttered. “I’m the one who nearly died, and now they’re off doing interviews together.”

Helen wiped tears of laughter away from her eyes.

Someday I was going to get her to teach me how to apply makeup that wouldn’t smear and run every time I blinked.

“We ran into your mother downstairs,” Elijah said. “She says you’re getting out this afternoon.”

“I am?” It was news to me, but I welcomed it. The surgeon who had sewn me up said that I was healing nicely and that he thought I’d be back to normal in a couple of months.

I would have been even more excited at the news that I was getting out of here if only I’d been able to quit fuming over Riker Kane taking all the credit for the work I had done.

It took another three hours for everything to be completed for my medical discharge. Elijah and Helen had left to get lunch, and I spent that time tracking down every piece of information I could about Riker’s role in getting Niko’s charges dismissed.

I could only assume the two of them had concocted this plan together. Apparently, Riker had gone back to meet up with Niko after he checked on me in the hospital. Then Niko had gone into the police station with Riker—which meant, I assumed, that Riker had picked up the \$50,000 bounty.

At the same time, Riker had turned in the information we’d gathered about Callahan’s cult. The newspapers described the evidence as “a video of officer Brent Callahan and discussing the Brandt murder and summoning another hellhound to set on Riker and his crew.”

Riker and his crew.

I was so angry that black and red spots danced in my vision.

It was my case. My recording. And the hellhound's attack had been on my body.

"Are you okay?" my mother asked as she followed an orderly pushing a wheelchair into my room.

"Can I leave now?" I asked.

"You sure can," the orderly said. "I just have to take you downstairs in a wheelchair."

"I can walk," I protested.

"Sorry. Hospital policy."

It was a stupid policy, as far as I was concerned. Nurses and doctors had been pushing me to walk up and down these halls for the last three days, but now they insisted on wheeling me out.

Whatever. As long as it got me out of here.

As the orderly pushing me down the hall chatted with my mother, I began working up a plan.

I would spend the next two months getting into the best shape of my life—I might as well, since I was going to have to be doing physical therapy anyway—and then I was going to become the best damn paranormal bounty hunter in the whole country.

That would show Riker and Niko.

*Bastards.*

Never mind the fact that I had difficulty moving from the wheelchair to my father's sedan.

It was still a good plan.

Right?



At home, my parents had set up a temporary bed for me in the living room.

“I can get to my own room,” I said.

“I don’t want you going up and down the stairs, mija.” My mother put her hands on her hips and pursed her lips—a look that I knew from years of experience meant I wouldn’t be able to argue with her.

And to be honest, I didn’t much want to.

I was still in more pain than I was willing to admit.

I had just stretched out on the living-room bed and closed my eyes when the doorbell rang.

I turned to my side and started slowly pushing myself up like the nurse had told me to do until my abdominal muscles were in better shape.

My mother bustled through the living room on her way to the front door. “You stay right where you are,” she instructed.

I nodded and sank back down.

A few minutes later, she came back into the room with an envelope in her hand. “This is for you.”

I frowned. “The mailman rang the doorbell?”

“No. It was a courier.”

I frowned at the envelope as she handed it to me, then pulled the tab at the top to open it. A single sheet of paper fell out, wrapped around a check. I took out the check and glanced at it.

\$25,000.

Then I read the note.

**Tessa —**

**This is your half of the bounty.**

**Don't forget to call me.**

**~Riker**

I glared at the note.

My mother reached down and plucked the check out of my hand.

“This is for you?”

“Yeah. I guess it's my half of the bounty.”

Of course, I was going to need to split it with Elijah and Helen.

*Still, I guess—I did a little quick arithmetic in my head—over \$8300 each isn't terrible.*

At least I was still on my parents' health insurance until I turned 25. Otherwise, the hospital bills would eat me alive.

The doorbell rang again, and mother shook her head. “You need quiet and peace to rest and heal, not constant visitors.”

Still, she showed Elijah and Helen into my makeshift sickroom after she answered the door.

“Did you get it?” Elijah asked, practically bouncing in his shoes, more energetic than I'd seen him for a long time.

“Get what?” I asked.

“Your check.” Elijah reached into his back pocket and pulled a check of his own out. Helen did the same thing after reaching into her purse. They flashed the checks at me.

\$8333 each.

But that meant...

“I know you're still on painkillers,” Helen said, “so I'm just going to spell it out for you. That bastard who kissed you—the bounty hunter one, not the werewolf one—gave you half the bounty and split the rest of it up among the

three of us.”

“He did?”

“He did. Does that make him less of a bastard?” Helen winked at me.

I stared at her with my mouth hanging open as I tried to decide how to answer her question.

For the third time in the last half hour, the doorbell rang again.

“*Dios mío,*” my mother exclaimed.

This time, she led Niko Savas into the living room.

“Glad to see you out of the hospital,” Niko said.

I nodded, staring at him warily. “I’m glad to be out.”

“I have something I need to talk to you about,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“I have a proposition for you.”

“Well, I guess that’s our cue to leave,” Helen said, and she and Elijah started to rise from their seats on the sofa.

“Actually, this has to do with you two as well.”

“What is it?” I asked as my friends sank back to their seats.

“I guess you know that Kane and I worked out a way for him to collect the bounty for you.”

I nodded. “He split it up among the four of us.”

“Good—I wanted him to. But I’ve been thinking.”

I wasn’t sure that sounded good.

“I’m not certain fifty thousand is enough to set you up in your own bounty hunter business.” He gestured at Helen and Elijah. “Not if you’re going to have two employees.”

“Probably not,” I agreed, sounding almost as confused as I felt.

“So, here’s what I’m thinking. I want to go into business with you.”

“As a bounty hunter?”

Niko laughed and waved his hands in denial. “No, no. As a silent partner. I’ll provide the initial funding and keep a percentage of the profits.”

“Why would you do that?”

He leaned back and tilted his head to one side as he regarded me. “Well, for one thing, I owe you. Between you and Riker, the two of you saved my ass.”

“Is there another thing?”

A slow smile spread across his face. “A couple of them. But most important right now, I think you are going to be damn good at this job.”

If that was the most important thing, what other reasons did he have?

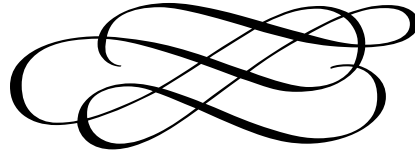
I wanted to ask, but Elijah and Helen were both leaning forward, staring at me with wide eyes. My gaze flickered back and forth between my friends and Niko, until finally Elijah couldn’t stand it anymore. “Say yes,” he hissed.

And with that, all the tension in the room dissolved into laughter.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Yes. I will start a paranormal bounty hunting business with you, Niko Savas.”

And I’d just have to wait to learn what those other reasons he had for wanting to work with me might be.

# EPILOGUE



So that's me. Tessa Fury—accidental bounty hunter. Half Irish, half Mexican, all Texan. Purple hair, anchor tattoo on my boob, a mostly real ex-husband from a mostly fake short-lived marriage, and a completely useless art history degree.

But now I've got a few other things too.

I've got a big fat check from a supernatural bounty hunt.

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

And 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 whole new career stretching out in front of me.

Whether I'm sure if I want it or not.

Guess it's time I figured out who else is on that list of fugitives to apprehend.

Yeah. Things are going to turn out okay.

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[Familiar Fury](#)  
[Tessa Fury, Accidental Bounty Hunter Book Two](#)

I'm Tessa Fury, accidental bounty hunter.

Half Irish, half Mexican American, all Texan.

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

But now 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 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 local vampire, I'm happy to step up and help him—even after I realize the vampire isn't exactly unfamiliar to me...

*If you can't get enough of books by Patricia Briggs, Ilona Andrews, Kelly St. Claire, Annette Marie, Shannon Mayer, Leia Stone, Jaymin Eve, and Linsey Hall, then you'll love this urban fantasy, paranormal mystery adventure series.*

# 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!

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