

LAURETTA HIGNETT



FRACTURED  
GODS

THE WAIF IN THE WILDS • BOOK TWO

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Epilogue

Thank you

A little more...

## CHAPTER 1



I turned away from the angry werewolf and suppressed a weary sigh. My day had started badly—and I know it’s a cliché—but it was only getting worse.

To start with, I woke up in a pool of blood. Not the fun *oh no, who did I kill this time?* type of blood. Or even the *oh, man, I drank way too much last night* kind of blood.

It was just the normal kind. I’d gotten my period and ruined my new sheets, and I was stupidly annoyed about it.

The irony bugged me. Once, when I was twelve years old, I got shot with a crossbow, and I had to pull the bolt out of my leg, wrap myself up, and hike six miles over the frozen tundra to safety before I bled to death. I did it all with a smile on my face. Now, I had tampons, hot packs and painkillers, and I was somehow more annoyed than being shot by an antiquated weapon.

From there, my day had gotten worse. I discovered that someone had used the last of my milk—probably Jeb, the emo-teen-slash-hellhound, who had taken to raiding my fridge. I needed milk in my coffee like I needed oxygen to breathe.

Trying to shake off my mood, I’d taken my black coffee outside to enjoy some morning sunshine and found a dead body washed up on the edge of the lake, right outside my cottage. He was a brownie, from the look of it; a tiny little guy with a long nose, wrinkled skin, and odd lacerations all over his naked body. It was too much for me to deal with so early in the morning, so, I palmed off the problem onto Dwayne, who

didn't have a job to go to, and asked him to deal with the dead fae on my lawn.

Then, once I arrived at work, I had to micro-manage Nathaniel, my boss, who was still sobbing over his twin sister abandoning him. Molly had chosen to return to their old, vicious werewolf pack instead of staying with him in Castlemaine, and Nathaniel was inconsolable.

And *finally*, to top off my bad day, I had five huge werewolves standing in my reception, and the Alpha, Braxton Myles—a big, hard-looking man with messy salt-and-pepper hair, a square face, deep-set pale blue eyes and teeth that glinted sharp in the downlights—had just announced he was here to abduct me.

Maybe I misheard him. I raised one eyebrow. “I’m sorry? I didn’t catch that part.”

“You heard me.” Braxton Myles’ grin widened. “You’re coming with me.”

“Oh.” I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

“C’mon. You should be flattered, girl.” He gazed at me through heavy-lidded eyes. “Not many women have the privilege of catching my attention, especially human women. You’re lucky. Y’know, when the boys at the bar in Calimesa told me that a blonde girl had taken an interest in my battle goose and disappeared with him, I expected to track you down and find you ugly as sin. All you animal rights bitches are exactly the same. Ugly, pasty vegans who have bad teeth and fart like horses. But you’re pretty.” He inhaled through his nose. “I gotta say, it’s an unexpected surprise.”

All surprises were unexpected, but I kept that zinger to myself. “Oh. I’m sorry,” I said out loud, keeping my face blank. He would never guess that at the same time I was staring vacantly at him, I was also carefully assessing his weight, muscle mass and reach, as well as cataloging the four other werewolf men who had accompanied him into the Flex Factory. “I’m still not following you.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that. A girl like you probably don’t have the smarts to know what’s going on half the time,” he chuckled. “But I’ll spell it out for you, honey.” He stared at me and spoke slowly and loudly, as if he thought I’d have trouble understanding him. “You’re gonna go and get that goose you stole from me, and you’re coming back to Ironclaw. *Now.*”

Adrenaline prickled through me, but I forced my expression to remain vacant. “You want me to come with you?”

“Yeah. Like I said, you’re lucky. It just so happens that I’m in the market for a new bitch. Ironclaw needs a little genetic diversity. That’s the problem with having your own kingdom, you know,” he added idly, his cold blue eyes lingering on my bare waist. “There’s too much of the same blood in the pack. One of our bitches just had a couple of pups with bad teeth.” His face twisted in disgust for a second. “I figure you owe me because of what happened to my wolves back in that bar in Calimesa. I lost four good men that night. All because you let that damned battle goose out of his cage.”

It wasn’t Dwayne that killed his werewolves. It was me. But since my success always hinged on people underestimating me, there was no way in hell I was going to tell Braxton Myles that.

“Oh. I don’t know what happened to that goose,” I said.

“Now don’t you lie to me, bitch.” His lip curled. “I’ve asked around. I hear there’s a new big white goose spotted on the lake, and he waddles off to a little cottage at night, and you’re the brand-new resident in that cottage. I guess you’ve bonded with that evil bastard somehow. I’ll tell you what.” He crossed his arms over his huge, barrel chest. “Let’s make this nice and easy for you. We’ll take you back to your little cottage now, you call the goose, and both of you will come and live with me in Ironclaw. I’ll even give you your own room at my place.”

I blinked, buying some time. “I get my own room?”

Another werewolf, lingering near the doorway, laughed out loud. “You’re lucky, honey. Normally, the Alpha’s bitches



don't get their own room.”

I finally broke eye contact and looked away from Braxton Myles, pretending to think, stalling for time. The odds were definitely not in my favor. Five full-grown male werewolves against one of me.

I'd been in worse situations. This time, though, I didn't have any grenades on me.

Through the windows in the double-doors, I could see a sliver of the gym beyond my reception area. Debbie had just started her “move it or lose it” dance class and was bouncing away on the little stage, dancing to upbeat techno. I'd only just met Debbie this morning. She was a human woman—honey-blond, very curvy—with a relentless, almost pathologically perky personality that immediately terrified me.

On the floor in front of her, the Countess Ebadorathea Greenwood, her slinky thin frame covered in gang tattoos, was jerkily mimicking Debbie's bouncy movements. Two other gym members, Mona and Suzanna—both tall, pale half-fae sisters with identical pixie-cut black hair and sharp pointed ears—were giving the countess a wide berth, dancing well back from the stage.

On the other side of the gym, Nancy, the witch who worked at the bar across the road, was doing free weights with what I assumed was her new partner, a much-older, much-fitter human woman called Kelly.

I stifled another sigh. I still hadn't processed Kelly's new membership yet. If I got abducted before I programmed her keycard, she'd probably demand a refund.

And there was Nathaniel, pacing back and forth just beyond the doors, his thoughts a whirlwind of determination and terror. He was trying to gather the courage to charge in and rescue me.

Poor Nathaniel. He'd run away from Braxton Myles and the Ironclaw pack when he was sixteen years old. His sister Molly had run with him but had gotten caught up with a religious cult up on the mountain and got trapped again.

Nathaniel had been waiting years for her to escape, and the second I killed the cult leader and freed her, she bolted back to the Ironclaw pack.

And she threw me under the bus, too. That's why Braxton Myles was here. She must have seen me with Dwayne, and took the information back to her old Alpha. I guessed Molly used me as a bargaining chip to get back into the pack with no repercussions.

Nathaniel knew that his old Alpha was here now, and from the glimpses I could see whirling in his aura, I knew he was hyping himself up to charge in and defend me.

He knew he was probably going to be beaten to death. Nathaniel couldn't shift, and unfortunately, his rigidly defined muscles were for show, not for combat. But he paced back and forward, bouncing on his toes, gathering up the courage to bust in and rescue me. It was sweet, but pointless. It made my heart ache. Poor Nathaniel.

I tilted my head, pretending to mull it over. "What if I say no?"

Braxton smiled. "Then we'll kill you right here, right now."

My eyes widened. "That's a little extreme, isn't it?"

"Aw, honey," he drawled. "It's justified, considering your actions led to me losing four good wolves. It's your fault that they're dead, so your life is forfeit." His lips split into a grin again. "But I'm a merciful Alpha. Instead of killing you, you'll come with me and join my pack. I reckon you'd make a good breeder."

I suppressed a shudder.

Braxton licked his lips slowly. "You're not a shifter, but that's okay. My genes are strong, we'll make some wolf pups. And if you don't make pups," he added, leering at me. "You can just be my maid. You can spend the next ten years making it up to me."

The other men laughed dirtily, nudging each other.

I pursed my lips, pretended to think. “Like... I’d be your wife?”

The other werewolf men, hovering around their alpha, laughed, giving big, dirty chuckles. A squat man with yellow teeth made kissy noises at me. “That’s it. Like a W.I.F.E,” he said, spelling out the letters. “Washing, ironing, fucking, and entertainment—and that’s it. That’s all y’all good for, anyway. You’ll love it. You get to breed and have lots of pups and take care of them.”

Sounded like a new level of my own personal hell. My brain whirled desperately. How the fuck was I going to get out of this? I only had my favorite blade and a small Ruger on me, no other weapons. There were five werewolves in front of me. If I fought, I’d die. Nathaniel would die, too.

Just then, a big man with a thick pelt of bright-red hair marched past the gym windows. He hesitated, seeing the little crowd gathered in the reception, backtracked, and stuck his head through the open door. “What’s all this?”

The men stared back at him, silent.

He looked at me. “Can ye tell me where I am now, lass?”

I resisted the urge to groan out loud. This poor guy had the worst timing. He was just another victim of the slipways—wherever in the world he’d come from, he’d ignored the warning tingle on the back of his neck, and stumbled through a tiny portal, ending up here in Castlemaine, the Bermuda Triangle of the United States.

“Turn around and go back the way you came,” I said, enunciating every word carefully.

“Noo chance,” the big red-headed man said, his eyes wide. “This place is a wee mystery, innit? I’m goan explore a bit more, I think.” He turned around and strode out, marching down the street.

I rubbed my temples and winced. There was not much I could do about the lost explorer right now. If I was alone, I’d run after him and haul him back to whatever invisible point he

came from and push him back into the tiny slipway so he could go home. But I had enough on my plate.

“Alright, now.” Braxton Myles took a few steps closer until his barrel chest almost brushed mine. He was only a couple of inches taller, but he tilted his head so he could look down his nose at me. “Make your choice, girl. Do you want me to snap your neck now for stealing my goose? Or are you coming with me?”

I’d already run through all my options several times. There were no good choices to be made. Me against five grown men would have been difficult, but I would have done it. Me against five werewolves, including an Alpha...

I had no chance. Even if all the members in the gym came to my aid, we’d still all die. The two part-fae women weren’t fighters and didn’t have strong magic. Nancy the goth bartender was a witch, but a low-powered one, from what I could tell, and even though her new girlfriend Kelly had some significant muscles, she was only human. Debbie the dance teacher, too, was only human. Her greatest offensive weapon was the ability to annoy people to death with her relentless perky chatter.

Countess Greenwood would be the only one powerful enough to make Braxton hesitate, but I got the feeling she would rather gnaw her own arm off than do anything out of her routine. She’d probably even eat me for interrupting her exercise dance class.

And Nathaniel... he had almost gathered the courage to rescue me. He figured at the very least he could distract the Alpha so I could run away. He was going to get beaten to death in the reception of his own gym, and he knew it. He’d made peace with it.

I whirled around.

“I’ll come with you,” I said hastily, grabbing my bag from behind the counter.

Braxton Myles gave a low chuckle. “Good girl.”

## CHAPTER 2



**B**raxton Myles picked me up, handling me roughly, and threw me in the back of his pickup outside. Two of his wolves got into the cab with him, and he started the engine with a roar. The smaller wolf with bad teeth jumped in the back beside me, never taking his eyes off me. His creepy, leering grin sent shivers down my spine. I tried not to vomit while I processed all the information from the images that whirled in his aura.

These four wolves were Braxton's betas, his personal lackeys, his little army. Handpicked by the Alpha for both their loyalty and cruelty, none of them were very smart, but they would do whatever Braxton told them to.

And he rewarded them for their devotion. Whenever one of the Alpha's bitches talked back or was too slow to carry out his orders, he let his lackeys all take turns with her until she remembered her place. This asshole in the back of the truck with me was looking forward to his turn.

They hadn't searched me. Braxton had swallowed my dumb blonde act. I still had my knives and my little Ruger tucked into a holster in the small of my back. I could take at least one of them out, right now. My impulses pricked at me.

*Pretend to jump, duck under his grasping hand, one thrust of the blade into the carotid, withdraw, second thrust into the femoral, push the body off truck, jump, run, haul ass out of Castlemaine.*

No. I couldn't do it. Braxton Myles would just come after me again. And Nathaniel would be in danger. Sighing, I slumped down in the bed of the truck.

I knew that most werewolf packs weren't like Ironclaw. I'd heard my old friends talk about the alpha movement over the years, how damaging it was. I knew that the shifter community leaders had done their best to take down the monsters who beat their wives and murdered their kids in the name of "alpha male" dominance, but the culture was still pervasive and hard to stamp out. Braxton Myles' Ironclaw pack was one of the last—and the largest—of the alpha-dominated packs now, and the only one standing for two reasons. First, none of his pack had appealed to the shifter leaders for help, probably due to fear they'd get their heads ripped off before they stepped a foot out of Ironclaw.

And second, nobody was coming to help, because in order to get to Ironclaw, you had to go through Castlemaine.

And nobody wanted to go to Castlemaine.

I quite liked it here, though. It was quiet and pretty, and I was still determined to finish my vengeance list and kill the man who trained me. Although, I quite liked him, too. It was safe to say I was still confused about who I was, and what I wanted out of life.

I held on as Braxton roared down the street in the pickup, taking the corners with unnecessary speed. Within thirty seconds, he pulled up right outside my little cottage.

I moved to climb out of the back of the truck. "I'll get my things."

The wolf next to me grabbed my wrist, his grip strong. "You don't need nothing. We're here to get the goose, not your makeup and pretty dresses."

"Go on, girl," Braxton ordered, hanging out the window, not turning off the engine. "Go get that damned goose. Buck, give her the crate."

Buck, the squat wolf next to me, shoved a metal cage in my hands. "Put him in this."

I took the cage gingerly. “But he’s not here,” I told him. “He leaves in the morning after breakfast and spends the day on the lake or up in the mountains in the woods.”

There was a tense moment of silence, and Braxton narrowed his eyes. “Buck—go in with her, check to see if that thing is in there.”

Buck swore, scrambled out of the truck, and hauled me roughly by the wrist towards my front door, tapping his foot impatiently as I unlocked it. We walked into the cottage, and I held my breath, listening carefully.

Nobody was home. Not Sarah, who had taken to popping in whenever she wanted, usually materializing on the couch in front of the TV whenever I put on a good show. Not Jeb either. He was sulking because I shouted at him for using all my milk.

I made a show of walking into my bedroom, then the bathroom, checking all the corners carefully, but I knew Dwayne wasn’t here. He’d be lazing on the lake or strutting up and down the Main Street of Castlemaine, letting the townspeople admire his snowy-white feathers and regal long neck. Dwayne was a good-looking goose, and he knew it.

Buck followed me through the cottage, shoving open doors and roughly pushing furniture out of the way. In the bedroom, he pulled open my wardrobe door and tossed it, throwing my clothes on the floor carelessly, then, he stomped into the bathroom and ripped my shower curtain off the rings.

My fingers itched to stab him. I held my tongue, wishing again that I had wards to stop shifters getting inside. Nathaniel wouldn’t be able to ward my cottage for werewolves, though. Technically, he was a shifter himself, and he’d originally bought the cottage for Molly, so his werewolf sister had somewhere to live when she escaped from the cult up the mountain.

Unfortunately, Molly took her daughter Daphne and bolted straight back to Ironclaw. Nathaniel had said that she wasn’t as smart as him, which meant that Molly must have the IQ of a cabbage.

Or maybe she was trying to protect Nathaniel in the same way that I was—by giving myself up to Braxton Myles, hoping he'd keep ignoring his useless former pack member.

That made more sense. Braxton's thoughts never drifted towards Nathaniel, not even once, so I guessed Molly never mentioned that her brother had opened up a gym in Castlemaine. Braxton had come for me and me only.

There was a crash in the kitchen—Buck had started tossing food containers out of the refrigerator. My irritation spiked.

“He's not here,” I said.

Slowly and deliberately, the wolf picked up a leftover chicken wing and shoved it into his mouth, chewing with his mouth open. “When will he come home?”

I ignored the flecks of chicken that sprayed out of his mouth. “Probably at nightfall, like usual. He'll come through the French doors at the back around six in the evening, looking for his dinner.”

Buck chewed some more, then nodded. “Fine. Let's go.” We walked out of the cottage, heading back through the front yard. “He's not here, boss,” he told Braxton. “Your new bitch says that he'll come home at nightfall.”

“Well, you better stay here until he comes back, Buck. Bait that cage and call us when he's trapped. You hear me?”

Buck kicked the pavement sulkily. “Yes, Alpha.”

“Go on. Get back in the truck, girl.” Braxton jerked a thumb at me.

I nodded, and climbed in the back, watching the alpha out of the corner of my eye. His thoughts told me that he was both pleased and annoyed by my capitulation. He liked it when his bitches fought back, and he liked using force to put them in their place. He enjoyed fucking women while holding his hands around their neck, and he enjoyed throwing the scraps to his betas to have afterwards. Before I wrenched my eyes away from his aura, I was treated to the sight of him visualizing the best way to break me.



I ground my teeth. Braxton Myles would not break me. Many had tried; all had failed. I'd been through hell many times in my life, I'd faced the worst people on earth, I'd been captured, beaten, tortured and defiled, and I was still alive, still kicking, still determined to set things right.

Nobody would break me.

Now, if I could only think of a way of getting out of this mess.

## CHAPTER 3



**B**raxton Myles took off, revving the engine of his truck obnoxiously. We drove through town towards the mountain and took a turn off just past the edge of town, heading west, chasing the late afternoon sun as it dipped below the edge of the mountain. The tiny winding road took us around the west ridge, heading up and over the mountain at the flattest point. My gut clenched as we left the north side. I felt the change in my bones.

We were no longer in Castlemaine. I couldn't feel the subtle waves of strange magic anymore—the drifts of energy that almost moved with the tides of the earth. I never realized it before, but the magical boundary of the town felt almost obvious to me, like driving through a different layer of atmospheric pressure.

We drove for a couple of miles down the mountain, following the single tree-lined dirt road. Then, the landscape changed abruptly, becoming drier, more arid, the hills stony and more raggedy, and I realized we were back in the Badlands of California. The Badlands, I knew from scouting out satellite maps, was a mountain range twenty miles wide, fifteen miles long, made up of stark, arid landscape that was almost impossible to traverse, even on foot.

The tiny dirt road took us directly into a dusty village. We drove slowly through an open gateway—a huge timber arch decorated with animal skulls and wickedly spiky antlers—and entered the werewolf stronghold of Ironclaw.

It looked like some sort of post-apocalyptic hellscape. Small dirty shacks dotted the roadside, some with old car wrecks in the yard, others with sad-looking garden beds filled with weeds. A little further along, an old garage with boarded-up windows showed the first signs of life—a young man wearing overalls rummaged inside the hood of a car. An older man with a weathered face and long gray hair sat on a stoop, chewing tobacco and spitting into a can. We drove by slowly, stirring up the dust so much I could barely see the village when I looked back.

Bigger houses further along displayed rusty play equipment in the front yards—swing sets and slides that looked like they'd give you tetanus and third-degree burns if you came within six feet of them. There were kids around, too, and they might have been playing, but as we drove by, they stopped what they were doing and watched us, their eyes wide and mouths open.

None of them looked particularly healthy or well-cared for. It was hot here on this side of the mountain; the sun beat down mercilessly, and the wind kicked up dust whenever it blew in. There was nothing visually appealing about this place, this tiny village stuck in the middle of the Badlands; it was dry, lifeless, soulless, and dirty. My stomach churned as we drove through. The idea of being stuck here... of being held prisoner...

I swallowed roughly and kept watching.

We passed the rickety shacks of the pack members, heading towards a large ranch-style driveway, where the road finally ended. Here, on the edge of Ironclaw, the property was much better maintained, with decent fencing and a big green lawn dotted with huge cypress trees. We drove slowly, almost reverently through the gates, and came to a long U-shaped house set low to the ground. There was water nearby somewhere; I could just hear it—a river behind the house, maybe.

The ranch was a sharp contrast to the dirty houses we'd passed on the way through. Braxton Myles lived in luxury, while the rest of his pack had to make do with crumbling

shacks in a desert wasteland. It set my teeth on edge that anyone would want to live this way, but then I remembered I lived this way with my father for sixteen years of my life. I didn't know any different, so I didn't leave.

The roar of the engine cut off, and in the silence, I could hear the river more clearly. I was right; it was just beyond Braxton's house.

He climbed out of the truck and slapped a meaty hand on the hood. "Out you get, girl," he barked.

I scrambled out of the back and dusted off my yoga pants, gazing around with wide eyes, keeping an expression of dazed confusion on my face. "Where are we?"

"This is my kingdom." He grinned. "Ironclaw. The birthplace of the biggest pack in America. This will be a city one day; you just watch."

Braxton's thoughts matched his words. The visions that whirled in his aura told me that one day soon, this whole area would be dotted with little pack houses, each dwelling filled to bursting with good little werewolves that followed his every command. He wasn't building a city, though, that implied diversity. The Alpha didn't want happy families.

He was building his own army. The little houses were the barracks for his soldiers, not family homes. Braxton was forming his own military dictatorship.

"Wow," I said, staring around the ranch. The river wound back in the direction we'd come from. It wouldn't feed into the lake in Castlemaine, not unless it wound around the mountain for miles and miles. "It's pretty. Oh, look! Goats!"

He chuckled and brandished his hand towards a field next to the house. "Sure. Goats do well here. We use them for hunting when there's nothing else around. I breed them especially to get ripped to shreds on the full moon," he said, baring his teeth slightly. Braxton was getting a little annoyed with my lack of fear. So far, he'd been buying my dumb blonde act, but he was very much looking forward to hearing me scream.

I gasped. “That’s horrible! Those poor goats.”

“When we run out of goats, we use humans,” he said, smiling, holding eye contact with me. “We get lost folk from Castlemaine wandering over the hills all the time. If they come into our territory, they’re fair game.”

I blinked. I didn’t have to fake my shock. I didn’t realize that the people who came through the slipways from other parts of the world might end up here, hunted for sport.

Maybe that’s what Nathaniel had meant when he told me about the slipways; lost people often end up being eaten. My stomach churned again when a grisly image rolled through Braxton’s thoughts—a flash of a bloody hunt. Apparently, Ironclaw *did* hunt humans.

I swallowed, letting Braxton see my fear, and he chuckled happily. “Let’s go, bitch.” He tugged my arm roughly. “I’ll show you your cell.”

“Cell?”

“Did I say cell?” He laughed out loud, and his three betas echoed him, chittering like hyenas. “I mean room. You guys can come too,” he added, his eyes shining with malice.

His thoughts had turned brutal. He wanted to claim me for himself, then give me to his betas. He wanted to break me.

I dug my heels in, grinding to a halt. I had to buy some time. “I don’t know if I can stay here, Mr. Myles,” I stammered.

He laughed and squeezed my forearm so hard it felt like the bone would break. “You don’t have a choice, girl. You’re mine now; you’ll do what I tell you.”

“But...” I swallowed. There was only one thing that would stop this asshole werewolf; only one thing that might make him hesitate for a moment. I’d been avoiding thinking of it, avoiding thinking of *him*, because every time I thought of him, a rush rolled through my body so visceral it almost knocked me to my knees. I didn’t know what it meant, and it made me so nervous, almost out of control, so wild I felt like I wanted to run away screaming.

I'd never felt this way before. I'd barely felt anything. For sixteen years of my life, I was an ice-cold killer. I murdered without mercy, without hesitation, without question—all for my father, the only person I loved, the only god in my life.

Then, I fell asleep, and for ten years, Sweet Dumb Chloe had the wheel. Sweet Chloe loved and laughed and did stupid things. She cried and danced and slept with whoever the hell she wanted to.

Ice-Cold Killer Chloe spoke eighteen languages and could diffuse a bomb blindfolded. Sweet Chloe kept putting aluminum foil in the microwave. She once got her hair tangled in a hand mixer while making cupcakes and walked around the apartment for two hours with the beaters stuck to her face before Prue cut her free.

It had taken me weeks to realize that Sweet Chloe wasn't a made-up moron, a fake profile, a cover story. She was me. She was who I always secretly wished I was.

I didn't want to say goodbye to her, so I didn't. I wanted to *feel* things.

But the feelings he stoked in me...

I took a quivering breath in and lowered my gaze to the ground. "I'm not sure if Mr. Malleus will be happy sharing, that's all."

There was a beat of silence.

"Malleus?" Braxton grunted and pulled me closer. "Why did you say that? What's he got to do with you?"

"H-He said the same thing, only a couple of days ago," I said, my voice shaking in fear. "He said I was his."

There was a long silence, and Braxton breathed in through his nose heavily, testing me. His eyes sparked; a flash of orange rolled over his iris. "Say that again." His breath stank of rotting meat.

Oh, fuck. The Alpha could smell lies. I suspected that might be the case—I'd heard that Max, the Alpha of DC and

Braxton's biggest rival—could smell when someone was lying, so I'd been careful with what I'd said so far, just in case.

Luckily for me, I didn't have to lie. "Mr. Malik Malleus. He said that, too."

"What did he say, exactly?"

"Well... A man came to Castlemaine to capture me, and Mr. Malleus killed him, and before he did it, he said"—I lowered my voice dramatically, trying to imitate Malik's pulse-quickenning smooth, deep voice—"She is *mine*."

Braxton stared at me, his expression darkening. "He said that you were his?"

I nodded frantically, keeping my eyes wide. "He's a scary guy, Mr. Myles. I don't want to make him mad."

Braxton scowled. I watched his thoughts whirl. The anticipation disappeared; he was no longer desperate to take me inside and attack me, but the vicious impulse still remained. One by one, scenarios flared in his mind's eye—him fighting Malik, his army of wolves swarming over Malik's castle, Malik and his brothers swooping down to attack. He was trying to decide if I was worth it.

Then, a face flared, fully formed in his thoughts; human-looking, with shining white eyes, and with that image came a feeling of smug confidence. Malik wouldn't attack him. Not unprovoked. Was I enough to provoke him?

I didn't know either.

After a long, long moment, Braxton huffed out a breath. "No matter," he growled. "Malleus will forget soon enough. A man like him has options." Resentment surged in his thoughts; he envied that Malik Malleus could fly all over the world to find his lovers, where Braxton was a victim of his own circumstance. He was building his own wolf army here and couldn't leave to run off and fuck other women all around the world like Malik could.

I watched as the Alpha made up his mind. He'd keep me here, in his pack, untouched, for just a couple of days. If Malik came looking for me, Braxton would claim I'd wandered into

his territory, and he'd kept me safe. And, if he didn't come within a few days, it was likely that Malik Malleus had forgotten about me, or he didn't care in the first place.

Then, Braxton would tear me in two. Anticipation made him feral. The image in his mind made my legs shake, but I locked my knees and hardened my heart.

"Boys." He jerked his head towards his three betas. Two of them were visibly drooling, staring at the exposed skin on my body. "We gotta take a raincheck on Blondie's initiation." One of them whimpered but cut himself off abruptly when the Alpha raised his eyebrow.

Braxton clamped a meaty hand on my forearm again and dragged me forward. "Let's go, bitch," he said gruffly.

I let him drag me into the house—I was safe for now. I needed to find Molly. "Is the girl from that cult still here?" I asked in a little voice. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine," he grunted. "Molly knows what's good for her. She's no idiot." He turned and looked at me for a second, his thoughts whirling, and he spoke them out loud. "You know what, I think I've changed my mind. I can't be bothered with you right now. It might be a good idea to put you in with her. She'll teach you the ways of the pack, so you don't get it into your head to try something dumb. Molly did something dumb, and she knows what the consequences are." He smirked. "It's still fresh in her mind."

He dragged me into the house. I stumbled along deliberately, buying time to scope out the house as I deliberately tripped over my feet. To the right, there was a huge living area decorated in tanned hides and leather couches, with stag heads lining the walls. He led me left, down a long corridor, heading towards a more functional area—storage rooms, bare concrete floors and plain wood walls, and a large, almost commercial-sized kitchen at the end.

Braxton let out a bark. "Molly!"

A skinny young woman with long black hair stuck her head out from one of the rooms.



“Come here,” Braxton ordered.

She shimmied around the door and marched down the hallway. Molly was shorter than me, wiry, with thin arms and legs, a tiny waist, and a hard expression on her face. Her coloring was exactly the same as Nathaniel’s—black hair, bitter-chocolate eyes, and olive-toned skin, but unlike him, her mouth was tiny, her lips thinned to almost nothing, and her chin was pointed rather than square. She wore a plain black vest and cut-off denim shorts; her feet were bare and dirty. Her eyes gave away nothing, but I caught the flare of recognition in her thoughts. She recognized me.

“This is Chloe. You know her, right?”

She nodded once, keeping her small mouth shut.

“Take her on a tour of Ironclaw. Show her the barracks, tell her how the pack runs, and let her know what is expected of her, then get your ass back here and finish prepping dinner. You hear me?”

She nodded again, eyes fixed on the floor.

“Make yourself at home, girl.” Braxton reached out and put his hand on the back of my neck and shook it roughly for a second.

I let out a little yelp. Braxton laughed and walked off, wide shoulders brushing the narrow hallway as he swaggered away.

I watched him go. He was so confident, and unfortunately, he had good reason to be. Ironclaw was perfectly isolated; the mountain pass that marked the border of Castlemaine was about five miles away. If I was to make a run for it, even if I made it out of this godforsaken shifter village, the first two miles of that was deserted, dry, arid landscape, impossible to hide in. Braxton Myles had at least a hundred wolves here, from what I could calculate. Of course he’d be confident.

It worked in my favor, for now. He hadn’t searched me, and I wasn’t restrained. Why would he bother to search a weak moron like me?

I waited until he was out of earshot, then turned back to Molly, who was watching me with narrowed eyes. “Come with

me,” she snapped. She turned around and marched away down the hallway, heading through the kitchen and kicking open a door at the end.

We emerged into bright golden light. It was late afternoon now; the sun beat down on my skin, hot and unforgiving.

I scrambled to keep up with her. Molly was much shorter than me, but she moved on her skinny legs with the frantic movements of a hungry mosquito. “Molly—”

“You’ll be staying in one of the huts,” she said, not slowing down. “The Alpha don’t like having women in the house during the day. If he requests your presence, you do what he tells you, then you leave as soon as he dismisses you and go back to your hut.” Her lip twisted into a grimace. “If you can’t walk, then you crawl out of here. You don’t want to be caught in the Alpha’s house after he’s dismissed you.”

“Molly, wait—”

She marched on, not hesitating. “When he gets bored with you, he’ll give you to one of his betas. If you’re lucky, you’ll get mated to one of them, and not passed around. Make sure you have a baby as soon as possible.” She turned and met my eye, her expression hard. “Nursing bitches don’t get beaten.”

“Molly...”

But she turned around and kept striding forward, down the dirt road, past the gates of Braxton’s property. She kept going, marching past a couple of crumbling houses, half-naked kids in the front yards tumbling over rusty shopping carts and bits of broken plastic playground equipment.

I grabbed her arm. “Wait!”

She wrenched it out of my grip, dark eyes flashing. “Don’t touch me.”

“Look,” I said, meeting her furious stare. “I’m sorry. You know who I am?”

“Of course.” Her lip curled. “I know you cooked up some fucked-up plan with my idiot brother to get me out of the

Children of the Passion. I don't know how you did it—you hired an assassin or something?"

I wasn't going to answer that one. "Molly—"

"Whatever you did, you fucked everything up for me." Her mouth twisted. "Do you know how long it took me to work my way up to one of Father Baron's main acolytes?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You mean you *wanted* to stay in that cult?"

"Damn right I did!" She whirled around and kept walking forward, moving at speed down the dusty road. "What the hell is wrong with you? Do you even know how many lives you and my stupid brother ruined?"

My mouth dropped open; I scrambled to catch up with her. "He was trying to save you!"

"My dumbass brother couldn't save his dinner for leftovers," she spat out. "It was a mistake to ever leave this pack. Now I gotta start at the bottom again."

"I— I don't understand."

She rounded on me. "That moron talked me into leaving Ironclaw when we were sixteen years old," she snapped, right in my face. "He got me convinced he could protect me when we got out. I knew his days were numbered here. He's weak and he can't shift, so he wasn't going to make it to adulthood. Oh, he had all these grand plans!" She laughed bitterly. "I can't believe I fell for it. The second we left Ironclaw, the Alpha came after me. Not my brother. *Me*. Oh, and he was furious! The alpha searched the town for me, and all I could do was hide. Nathaniel was sobbing and crying like a little bitch, trying to organize a bus out of Castlemaine. A bus!" Molly spat at my feet. "There's no fucking public transport in that godforsaken town. I had to go up to the Children of the Passion and hide with Methusela Baron, just to keep my head on my neck."

I barely ever got surprised anymore, but the bile she was spewing took me completely off guard. "Nathaniel *was* trying to help you. He stayed in Castlemaine, when he should have

run far away from his old pack, just because you were there. And he kept coming up with ideas to try to rescue you from Methusela Baron. He bought a cottage for you and your daughter. He bought you a whole house, Molly!”

She rolled her eyes. “As if I need a fucking old shack. I needed someone to look after me, and that weak asshole couldn’t protect me. I don’t know why I let him convince me he could. Leaving Ironclaw with him was the worst mistake I ever made in my life.”

Molly whirled around, tossed her hair back, and kept walking. I scrambled to follow her. She turned left off the road abruptly, marching down a crumbling concrete path, and kicked open the door of a little shack. “I have a house. This is it. Or, it will be, once the Alpha is sure I’m not going to run again.” She jerked her head, indicating I should follow, and stomped inside.

The house was dark, with several layers of stained, threadbare carpet piled up in the hallway and broken ornaments and ugly knickknacks scattered on side tables. The air smelled rank and musty.

Molly called down the hallway. “Momma!”

An older woman with a very square face stuck her head out of a side room. She was far bigger than Molly, square-shaped, with very tanned olive skin, a short cap of iron-gray hair covering her scalp, and small pursed lips.

She moved into the hallway. Her eyes narrowed on me. “Who’s this?”

Molly let out a frustrated noise and pointed a thumb at me. “This is the Alpha’s new bitch. She’s the animal rights idiot who let out that damned goose in that bar in Calimesa. Chloe, this is my mom, Julie.”

“This is her?” The older woman eyed me suspiciously. “The same girl that took out Methusela’s cult?”

Molly huffed out another breath. “Yeah. It wasn’t her, though, I think she got Hellix to do it. She’s some crazy do-gooder with a white savior complex, I think. She swanned in

just as the other members were deciding to abandon the church, took Micah off the cross, and hauled him outside. I saw the Vampire Lord with her there, and the goose, too.”

“Huh. She’s probably fucking Malik Malleus.” Julie’s face twisted in disgust. “And she talked him into finally getting rid of Methusela Baron, for some ungodly reason.” She rolled her eyes and let out a groan. “If I could go back in time, I’d thrash you senseless for leaving with that idiot boy.”

I couldn’t believe it. “That boy is your *son*,” I breathed out. “He put himself in danger to try to get Molly out of this hellhole.”

“This is our home, bitch,” Julie snarled. “You don’t have a clue what you’re talking about; you better watch your goddamn mouth. Nathaniel ran away just trying to save his own skin. He’s a fucking weakling.”

I stared at his mother, absolutely bewildered. “Nathaniel is a kind, sweet boy—”

“That don’t mean shit.” Julie cut me off and wrinkled her nose. “He’s nothing to me. He’s defective. If I had known I was giving birth to a weak idiot who couldn’t shift, I woulda thrown him in the incinerator as soon as they pulled him out of me.”

“He’s not weak, and he’s not an idiot. He’s got a thriving business—”

“I find that hard to believe,” Julie scoffed. “He was barely surviving here as the village idiot. He could have left Ironclaw and nobody would have cared, except he somehow managed to talk my daughter into coming with him.”

Molly ground her jaw, thinking of the real reason she left. “I was young and stupid. And now I gotta pay the price. At least the Alpha is buying our story for now, momma.”

They exchanged a look. Fear blazed through both women’s thoughts, and I watched carefully for a moment. From what I could tell, Molly had told Braxton that Nathaniel kidnapped her to sell her once he left the pack. She escaped and tried to

come back to Ironclaw. But then Methusela Baron had caught her instead and refused to let her leave his cult.

And Braxton—a man used to buying and keeping people as slaves—had swallowed her story. He'd accepted her back into Ironclaw without doling out too much of a punishment, but he'd pushed her right down to the bottom of the pack hierarchy, a place where everyone could take a bite out of her. Molly was pissed.

Her mother was bitter, too. Molly's new status as the pack whipping girl reflected badly on her, compounded by the fact that the only other pup she'd managed to birth was an idiot that couldn't shift. Julie glared at me, her thoughts blisteringly savage. "Why is she even here? Why didn't the Alpha just kill her?"

"He'll use her as a piece of ass. And I know he wants the goose back, so he's using her as bait, or something." Molly shrugged. "He thinks it will give him more bargaining power with our new neighbors. The goose is obviously one of theirs, so the Alpha thinks he'll get paid more if he gets it back for them."

A sinister buzz ran down my spine. I wasn't actually sure where Dwayne had come from, but I was almost sure it wasn't anywhere on earth. I watched Molly's thoughts carefully, looking for more information as to what she was talking about. Bargaining power with what new neighbors? Who were their new neighbors? Someone in Castlemaine? Her thoughts gave me no clues.

"That makes sense." Julie nodded. "I wondered how a goddamn goose took out five of our pack, so I guess he's enhanced. No wonder the Alpha is pissed he got away." She looked me up and down, her lip curled. "She's a poor compensation, though. She's a human."

"Yeah. She won't last long. I guess if she can't lure the goose in here, and she can't breed, he'll just use her for hard labor. He wants us to show her the ropes around here." Molly's little mouth twisted as she looked at me again. "She's some kind of moron, though. Just like my stupid brother. She won't

last long. I'll give it a week before the Alpha puts her up for the hunt.”

I watched their thoughts in horror for a moment. The idea of me—crying, screaming, running on bleeding feet, trying to escape a slathering pack of vicious werewolves who hunted me—was appealing to both women. I was nothing to them. Not a person. An inconvenience.

Ironclaw was a place of nightmares. The Alpha was a monster; his betas were sadistic freaks. The people here were vicious, nasty, and inbred. They were content to live in dirty run-down shacks.

Even the landscape seemed to mirror the people who lived here. This side of the mountain was firmly in the Badlands; it was dry and desolate, the sun harsh and unforgiving. The wind cut through the village savagely; dust smothered everything. Flies gathered on anything moist, and the whole village stank with a musty, feral odor.

I wanted to get out of here so badly, my skin itched.

“Mommy?” The little voice drifted from down the hallway.

“Not now,” Molly snapped.

A tiny dark-haired girl appeared at the end of the hallway. This must be Daphne. “I need to use the outhouse,” she whispered, twisting her gray oversized t-shirt dress between her fingers compulsively.

Julie rounded on her. “Then go!”

The girl froze. Her big brown eyes seemed to take up most of her face. She was pale, too, unlike her mom and grandmother—she looked as if she hadn't been outside much in her life so far. She stammered for a moment. “I'm—I'm scared.”

“Daphne, girl, you have to go outside,” her grandmother spat out. “This is your home now, and you gotta get used to it. I can't spend all day taking care of you. Soon, you'll be mated, and you'll be taking care of your own family. Get your shit together.” Julie's thoughts told me she couldn't wait to offload

her little granddaughter onto someone else. It wouldn't be long before she was mated to one of the other werewolf men.

"But..." I couldn't stop the words that slipped from my lips. "She's—She's just a baby."

"She's six years old." Julie's face twisted. "Ironclaw women grow up fast. We come of age early around here. I became a woman at eleven, and I had the twins at thirteen. As soon as Daphne gets her period, she'll be ready to mate; that's just the way it is." She thrust her chin in the air. "The Alpha always looks ahead. He'll be choosing someone for her soon, so she's got to get her shit together and make herself look good now."

My eyes flickered towards Daphne. The poor girl looked terrified. Shaking, she edged backwards, down the hallway until she was out of sight.

I couldn't help myself—I was absolutely horrified. "You want that for her? You want that tiny little girl to be forced into marriage at ten years old?"

They both stared at me like I was stupid. "That's the way it is," Julie said. "I went through it, and I'm still standing. Daphne will be mated young and raise pups like the rest of us had to. When the Alpha is sure Molly isn't going to run again, he'll find someone else for her to mate with, too. It's better than being dead."

"She's a *child*."

"She's a wolf," Julie snarled. "Don't presume to know anything about us, bitch. You come in here all high-and-mighty, well, you're fucked, too." Her expression changed suddenly; she smirked. "You don't know what you're in for. The Alpha will break you apart."

I stared at her. "This isn't right," I whispered. "You know this isn't right, don't you? Wolf packs don't live like this."

"Yeah, they do," Molly said. "It's nature."

"It's not. Not normal wolves, not werewolves, and not shifters. The alpha movement... it's just a bunch of garbage



some asshole shifters latched onto because it gave them an excuse to act like tyrants and treat their families like slaves.”

Julie lifted her chin again, defiant. “Other packs *should* live like this. Packs need a strong leader. We got what it takes to be on top when the wars come.”

“What wars?”

She rolled her eyes. “The supe wars,” she said, like it was obvious. “Ironclaw will be the strongest shifter pack in the country, so we’ll be able to take out the vamps and the witches easily. The Alpha has got it all figured out.” Her thoughts supplied a gory scene—a magical battle where the Ironclaw pack charged in and ripped out witch throats and tore out vamp hearts.

Julie really believed it, too. She thought that one day, the treaty between all the supernatural creatures would dissolve, and we’d go to war for supremacy. And she believed that Ironclaw would come out on top. In her world, only the most vicious would survive.

I stifled a groan. This place was a hellhole. Not only did Julie not care, she thought it was a good thing that she belonged to such a bloodthirsty pack. Molly was only interested in surviving. Neither of them had any sympathy for Daphne and what she might have to go through.

Julie had no intention of protecting her. Molly, too, had no thoughts in her head of saving her daughter; she was consumed with the idea of clawing her way up the pack’s hierarchy and securing herself a mate who could protect her.

Molly grabbed her mother’s arm. “I gotta get back to the Alpha’s house,” she said. “I’m not done with prepping the food for tonight, and I still gotta scrub his whole bathroom. Can you look after his new bitch for me? Show her around the village.”

Julie curled her lip. “I ain’t got no time for that. You’ve already dumped your brat on me, and suddenly, I’m spending all my time tryna get her to behave like a normal pup. That girl

is too scared to use the outhouse by herself,” she snapped. “Now you want me to do *more*?”

“I’ll look after Daphne,” I said quickly. “I can help.”

Molly rolled her eyes. “Christ, you are a fucking do-gooder. Fine.” Her thin lips tightened. “Stay here, look after Daphne, and help Momma get the house ready for tonight. At least one of the men will want to come back here after dinner with the Alpha.” Her eyes lit up viciously. “That is, unless he lets all his betas have a turn with you.”

It took more effort than unusual to keep my expression blank. A burning fury scorched its way through my belly; my hands itched with the impulse to ball up and punch her in the face until she swallowed her teeth. Seeing I was suitably rattled, Molly smirked, whipped around and marched straight out of the house, slamming the door behind her.

It took a lot to throw me off balance, but I was well and truly shaken. From Nathaniel’s descriptions of his sister, I’d been expecting a dopey, sweet shy girl. But Molly was a vicious bitch who would crawl over anyone to protect herself, and her mother was even worse. How did Nathaniel come from this gene pool?

Julie glared at me for a moment, then pointed. “Go and help Daphne in the outhouse before she pisses in the house. Then, you two can both finish the laundry. We don’t got running water, but there’s a well out back. Draw some water and get washing.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I nodded and made my way slowly through the little house. There wasn’t much to it, just a couple of tiny bedrooms packed to the ceiling with junk, a small kitchen with an old wood stove, and a rickety metal table. The linoleum floor was stained and cracked.

A door through the kitchen led out to the backyard—another bare, lifeless patch of earth. Sad-looking raised vegetable beds were scattered around the fence line. A squat cinder-block building sat at the back of the property, with a smaller stall next to it for the toilet. Beyond the ramshackle fence, a little overgrown field held a half-dozen or so pretty

goats, all bleating and leaping around the frame of a burnt-out car.

The outhouse was ancient, and it stank—I could smell it from the back door. Daphne stood outside the stall, her legs trembling. “Hey,” I called.

She turned, her huge eyes somehow inexplicably bigger.

“Do you need some help?”

Daphne just stared at me blankly. Her thoughts told me she didn’t understand. She didn’t know what help was, because nobody had ever given her any.

She didn’t know what she was supposed to do. I watched her child-like thoughts flick nonsensically in her aura, and finally, I understood. Daphne had only learned by imitation. She’d learned quickly that all she had to do was try to do what everyone else was doing and stay out of sight as much as possible. Nobody could hurt her if they couldn’t see her.

My heart nearly broke. Slowly, I walked closer. “Your name is Daphne, right?”

After a long moment, she nodded.

“I’m Chloe. I’m new here, too. It’s hard being the new girl, isn’t it? You’re just not quite sure what you’re supposed to be doing.”

She thawed a fraction; the tension in her shoulders loosened.

“Your mom wanted me to watch you for a while,” I said. “I’m going to help you with the laundry. Is that okay?”

Her thoughts were confused. Nobody had ever asked her permission for anything before. She didn’t understand.

Tears pricked at my eyes, and I brushed them away quickly, shoving Sweet Dumb Chloe back in her box for the time being. This was not the time for her; I needed Ice-Cold Killer Chloe in charge. “I can take you to the outhouse, if you want.”

“There might be spiders in there,” she finally whispered. “There were always spiders in the Church toilets.”

“Oh, I understand. You’re scared of spiders.”

“No. I’m scared of the snakes that eat the spiders. I’m scared a snake will come up the pipe and bite my bare butt when I’m sitting on the toilet.”

I nodded, stifling my smile. “That’s understandable. I’m scared of goats,” I lied. “I’m worried they’ll headbutt me with their horns and knock me unconscious.”

The terror in her eyes faded. There was no reason to be scared of me, a human stranger, who was scared of goats. “The goats here are nice.” She pointed at the little herd. “Cher and Sonny won’t hurt you.”

“Those are their names? The two grown-up goats?”

“It is now. They didn’t have names before, but I gave them some. Their kids are naughty, but they only got little horns, so you don’t gotta worry about them.”

I nodded. “Will you introduce me?”

Daphne hesitated for only a second. “Sure.”

We walked over to the field, and the two adult goats rushed over. Daphne pulled up a handful of wilted spinach from the garden bed and held it out. Cher and Sonny butted at each other and managed to get a mouthful each, while their four kids gamboled happily in the background. “Grandma says the goats are for eating,” Daphne said. “She says she lets Cher have babies, so we can eat her babies.”

“How do you feel about that?”

It took a moment for her to answer. Daphne wasn’t used to people asking her how she felt about things—she was only used to people telling her how to feel. “I don’t know,” she finally said. “At the Church, we didn’t eat no meat at all, but Momma says it’s different here, because we’re allowed to shift. Father Baron didn’t let us, because he said holding in our wolf made us closer to God.”

“And what do you think?”

Daphne hesitated, and bit her lip. “Cher and Sonny are my new friends,” she finally said. “They’re my only friends. I don’t think I like the idea of eating my friends.”

I patted her shoulder gently. She flinched away at first, but after a second, she leaned into my palm, obviously relishing the contact. It made my chest hurt so bad, I felt like I could explode. Frantically blinking back tears, I took a deep breath. “I don’t think I like the idea of eating my friends, either. Listen, Daphne...”

She blinked up at me.

“Do you like it here? In Ironclaw?”

She shook her head frantically. Her fast denial took me a little by surprise—she’d been so hesitant about everything else. “I’m so scared all the time,” she whispered to me, her voice shaking. The words tumbled out of her little mouth quickly. “There’s so many people here, so many big men; they make me feel sick in my belly. Mama says I don’t gotta be scared, but I can’t help it.” She swallowed. “It’s so different. Back at the Church, there weren’t many of us, not many men, and it was always quiet. Here, it can get really loud. The spaces are too wide open. I’m scared of the outside. Granny had to whip me to get me to come out here to use the bathroom. Granny isn’t very nice,” she added under her breath.

I clenched my fists involuntarily; my knuckles cracked. With effort, I forced myself to calm down. I wanted Daphne to trust me, and I’d only scare her if she could see how furious I was. “It’s okay to feel that way, Daphne,” I said softly. “You’re allowed to be scared.”

After a moment, Daphne looked up, and met my eyes. “Last night I dreamed that Granny let out Sonny and Cher and the kids so that the pack could hunt them. But she made a mistake and got confused, and pushed me out with them, thinking I was a goat, too. I was running along with the kids, and a wolf jumped on me and ripped my throat out.” Her dark eyes suddenly shimmered with tears.

“You had a nightmare.” I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“Oh. No.” She shook her head again frantically. “No, it was a *good* dream. I was scared at first, but then the wolf killed me, and I was happy that it was all over. I was happy I was dead.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “When I woke up, I was sad.”

I had to look away and count backwards from fifty to stop myself from screaming out loud. “What about your mama? Wouldn’t you be sad to leave her?”

“I—I—don’t really know her,” Daphne stammered, as if she was confessing a great sin.

I peered at her, confused. “You don’t know your mom?”

She shook her head. “I never saw her much. Rebecca mostly looked after me when we were at the Church. She’s older than Mama; she looked after all the kids. I begged her to take me with her when everyone was leaving, but my mama grabbed me and told me I was coming with her instead.” Her chin trembled. “I should have run away.”

I swore under my breath and frantically rearranged the contents of my head, adjusting plans, recalculating.

Finally, I looked down at her. “Daphne, honey... I’m getting you out of here.”

## CHAPTER 4



“*R*eally?” Daphne watched me suspiciously. “Can you get me away from here? Away from Ironclaw?”

“You bet.” I took her by the hand and led her to the outhouse. “You’re going to have to trust me, though, because it’s gonna be dangerous.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “If we get hurt, I might die, and that’s okay with me. I think that’s what granny calls a win-win.”

She was only a little girl, and she was looking forward to dying. Goddamnit.

I turned away, wiped angry tears from my eyes and pushed open the door of the tiny separate outhouse, peering inside. Daphne watched me lift the wooden toilet seat, and I made a show of inspecting it carefully.

“All clear.” I grinned down at her. “No snakes, no spiders. Go ahead, girlfriend.”

Daphne gave me the tiniest smile as she walked inside to do her business.

I left her and walked back inside the outbuilding, checking the shelves of the laundry section. First, I pulled on a pair of stained rubber gloves, which would help hide my scent from the things I was touching, and carefully checked all the items cluttering the shelves, pulling down a few things I might need—two empty plastic bottles, a big empty detergent container, and a big washing-up bucket. Then, I found a giant tub of petroleum jelly, which was perfect and exactly what I needed.

I took it as a sign that my hastily thrown-together plan might just work.

I piled the things on the bench, walked back to the clothesline and pulled off an oversized check shirt—one of Julie’s, obviously, since it could have wrapped around me twice comfortably. It came down to mid-thigh. There were no kids’ clothes, though. I eyed the line of washing, pursing my lips.

Daphne, back from the toilet, tiptoed up next to me, standing very close in the way that kids do when they know you’ll take care of them, and they’re terrified they’ll leave you behind. “Daphne, honey...” I looked down at her. “Can you grab something to change into? Something very clean?”

She held out her arms. “I don’t have any other clothes, ma’am. Mama burned my church robe yesterday. This is one of mama’s old t-shirts, from when she lived here in the pack.”

I swallowed the curses that rose in my throat and nodded. “Well, it looks great on you. But I need something clean.” I surveyed the washing line again.

“Why?”

“We’re going to trick the wolves, so they don’t chase us.” I snagged the smallest t-shirt I could see off the clothesline, pulling Daphne back inside the laundry room. “Dogs have very good noses, you know, they can track anything. But there are a few things we can do to trick them, and we’re gonna do them all so we can get away.” I gave her what I hoped was a comforting smile.

“Okay.” She nodded patiently, staring up at me with those enormous brown eyes. The trust in her gaze almost broke me all over again. I turned away so I could concentrate on pulling together a plan.

No matter what, I had to get the fuck out of here, and the only way was to try to sneak out. There was no way in hell I was going to be able to kill any of these wolves by myself, not with any amount of mind-reading or trickery. All I had was



four bullets in a tiny Ruger, my blade in my boot, and a burning desire to run away from this hellhole as fast as I could.

Maybe, once I had my Glock loaded with silver-coated bullets, I'd feel a little more confident of my chances in a straight fight. If I stayed in Ironclaw any longer, chances were I would be tortured into madness before morning.

I had to get back to Castlemaine, onto my own turf, and back to my friends.

And I had to take this innocent girl with me.

## CHAPTER 5



*W*e got to work. First, I filled the giant bucket with water and put it on the floor of the outhouse. “We’re going to take a little bath. Do you want me to go first?”

Daphne nodded, so I quickly removed my weapons, placing them in a bleach solution in the sink. I stripped, scrubbing my body with my clothes as I removed them, making sure to get as many dead skin cells off my body as I possibly could.

Naked now, I bundled all my clothes into a ball, securing it by wrapping an old piece of twine around it and making a loop at the end of the twine so I could hang it up. Then, I stepped into the bucket, vigorously washing my hair before scraping it back into a tight bun. I scrubbed my body roughly with a scrubbing brush I found under the sink. It hurt, but I did it anyway. Daphne watched me with wide eyes.

“We gotta take off as many dead skin cells as we can,” I explained as I took off a few layers of epidermis. When I was done, I dried myself with a threadbare towel I had pulled off the line and grabbed the jar of petroleum jelly and showed it to her. “Now, we’re going to slather ourselves in this.”

Her little button nose wrinkled. “Why?”

“When dogs follow your scent, they’re actually just picking up the smell of the dead skin cells you leave behind wherever you go.” I scooped out a big handful of clear jelly. “If you can keep all your skin cells on your body where they belong, it makes your scent trail weaker. This petroleum jelly

will help stop any shedding. So we're going to cover ourselves completely." I took two big handfuls and ran it over my head, covering my hair first, then every single inch of my freshly scrubbed skin.

Daphne's eyes lingered on my bare body. "You have a bald foo-foo."

"Yes, I do." Sweet Chloe had committed to laser hair removal.

"Mama has a hairy foo-foo. It looks like a squirrel stuck between her legs."

"Is that right?"

"Yours looks like a plucked chicken. And look—there's a string hanging out of it!"

"Don't worry about it." I stifled a grin and pulled the stolen shirt over my head. It was a little roomy but long enough to cover my arms completely. It felt gross, squishing myself into dry clothes when I was covered from head to toe in jelly, but I knew for a fact that this trick worked.

"Okay," I said, clapping my hands. "I'm all done. Now, here's where the trick comes into it. I'm going to fill this water bottle up with my bathwater." Carefully, I tipped the big bucket sideways and filled the water bottle to the brim.

Daphne watched me in silence. "What are you going to do with that?"

"You'll see." I smiled at her. "Now, it's your turn."

I refilled the bucket with fresh water. Daphne got undressed and stepped inside it, splashing a little in the cold water. I picked up her shirt with a stick and put it aside. Daphne started to scrub herself carefully, methodically brushing the scrubber over her arms and legs. When she stepped out, her skin was pink and raw, and she dried herself with another ratty towel very carefully. The poor kid hadn't seen much sunlight.

"Here," I said, tossing her the jar of jelly. "Go crazy."

She even smiled a little as she scooped out the jelly and squashed it all over her body. I directed her to a few spots she'd missed, passed her the new t-shirt, and poured her skin cell-loaded bathwater into a different water bottle.

“Good job.” I grinned at her, ignoring the anxiety tightening my chest. My senses were on high alert; my ears strained to catch the sound of anyone approaching. If Julie came out to check on us, I'd have to kill her. She was still inside. We were safe for now.

Daphne wiggled from side to side, making a faint squelching sound. “This feels funny.”

“Sure does. Now, we're almost done. We've got one last thing to do.”

“What's that?”

“We're going to let your friends go, too,” I told her, smiling. “Come on.” I picked up the empty plastic detergent container, as well as our clothes bundles on the end of the sticks, and hustled her out of the outbuilding.

Time was running out. Adrenaline pulsed through me, but I kept my expression calm. “We need to move quickly now.” I jammed my feet back into my bleached trainers and strapped my clean holsters back on.

The sky was finally darkening. It must be close to sunset. It made things easier—we would be harder to spot from a distance—but once the sun set it would make everything much harder for us. In full darkness, without any supplies, there was a chance Daphne and I could get lost and die of exposure if we weren't caught by the wolves first.

Keeping my movements calm and my expression serene so she wouldn't get panicked, I pulled Daphne gently by the hand over to the goat pen and grabbed a handful of wilted spinach. Sonny edged forwards to take a nibble. I grabbed him by the horns, holding him steady. Carefully, I tied my plastic water bottle to one horn, and Daphne's bottle to the other. Sonny bucked furiously and bleated, annoyed, so I shoved another handful of spinach in his mouth and let him go.

Daphne leaned over the fence, scratching Cher's nose, cooing softly. I crept up and snagged her by the horns, too, and draped my bundle of clothes over one horn and Daphne's over the other. "Okay, time for phase two of our plan." I grinned, trying to calm my heartbeat. We needed to get the fuck out of here before Julie came to see what we were up to. "Is there a back gate?"

Daphne nodded, pointing behind the pen. I strode forward and opened the gate. The kids went first, happily gamboling out of the pen into fresh pastures. As Sonny edged past me, eyeing me suspiciously, I pulled my blade and lunged, grabbing his horns in one hand. Quickly, I stabbed a little hole in each water bottle, let go of his horns, and slapped his butt as hard as I could. Sonny squealed, outraged, and charged out of the pen like a madman, kicking his feet and dripping water on the dusty road. His wife, with her clothes-decorated horns, followed him. Their kids trailed happily in their wake.

"There goes our scent," I said to Daphne, smiling, while my heart pounded in my chest. "Let's go. We gotta get down to the river." Hand in hand, we rushed down to the back of the property, heading towards the sound of the gurgling stream.

I scrambled down a rocky embankment first and climbed into the water. It was more of a creek than a river and the water was ice cold, freshly melted from the snow on the mountain. "Here," I said, handing Daphne the detergent bottle. "I guess you can't swim."

She shook her head, struck dumb with fear.

"This is going to help you float," I told her, wrapping both of her arms around the bottle.

Daphne looked at the empty canister in her arms, confused. She didn't know what floating was. She had lived her whole life in a cult up until now; they hadn't even had access to running water. The poor girl had no idea what to do. "You'll see," I said, giving her a reassuring pat. "But don't worry about it. I've got you, okay? I'm not going to let anything hurt you."

A noise floated over from the house; the sound of Julie calling Daphne's name. Fuck. If Daphne heard it, she chose to ignore it. She was terrified but determined to stay with me.

“Okay,” she said, her little jaw set in a firm line. “I can do this.”

“You’ll be fine. I’ve got you. I can swim like a fish, and it’s really fun.” I smiled at her, then looked up, surveying the path of the water. “For now, just hold onto this bottle with both arms, and we’re going to float down the river feet-first, just for a little bit, okay?”

From the lay of the land, I guessed the river ran through Ironclaw, then veered back west, away from the mountain. I couldn’t take the chance of just following it—I had no idea where it went, and it was so icy cold, both of us could be dead of hypothermia in a couple of hours.

But if we could ride the river past the boundary of Ironclaw, it would take us a little way back towards the mountain. Then, we could get out and make a run for it, straight up the ridge. And then...

The wolves could probably chase us into Castlemaine and tear the flesh from my bones with their claws in the middle of the road.

It didn’t matter. I just had to get out of here.

A screech sounded above the gurgle of the river—Julie’s voice, a little closer this time. She sounded pissed. It would only be a minute or so before she realized we were both gone. If I’d profiled her correctly, I had about one minute and thirty seconds before she started screaming for the other wolves to come help her.

I settled myself in the freezing water and waved Daphne forward. “Come, sit in front of me, honey. I’ve got you.”

Eyes wide, she crept forward, shivering as the cold water reached her waist. It wasn’t deep enough, but it would be enough to float us downstream.

I wrapped one hand around her chest. “Hold that bottle tight, okay? And stay as flat as possible; don’t sit up. We’ll

move better that way.” And reduce the chances of anyone spotting us. If any of the pack were hanging around the river right now, we were screwed. Instead of imagining what they would do to us if they caught us trying to escape, I smiled. “Relax.” I gave her a quick hug. “It’s just like a rollercoaster.”

She frowned. “Like a what?”

“Uh, like a...” Damn it, I didn’t even remember seeing so much as a swing set in her old cult. The poor girl wouldn’t have a clue what a toy was, let alone an amusement park. “It’s like a piggyback ride,” I amended. “But with water instead of a person.”

“Okay.” She nodded, determined, and my stomach flipped. This little girl was prepared to run off with a stranger to escape the only life she’d ever known. I’d never been that brave. When I was her age, I snuck into a mansion and smothered a newborn baby in his crib because my daddy told me to do it.

I always did what I was told. I’d never been brave enough to run away from the hellish life I was born into. But then again, I never had a mysterious stranger hold out her hand and offer to take me away from it all.

If I had, would I be as brave as Daphne? I didn’t know.

A howl tore through the air, and I cursed under my breath. That was too quick. We had to get moving now.

I pushed off the hard gravel bottom of the river, staying low and horizontal, and steered us away from rocks and submerged logs with one hand. The river’s banks were steep; I couldn’t see any of the landscape from so far down, and the lack of vision disturbed me. Another howl joined the first one, sounding a little fainter as we floated away from Julie’s shack.

I heard shouting. A furious argument had broken out. They knew we were gone.

My adrenaline spiked. *Please, please, whatever god might take mercy on me right now, I don’t deserve it, but please let me and Daphne sneak through this godforsaken pack village without being seen...*

If I were caught right now, the wolves would beat me senseless for trying to escape, but they would be careful not to kill me. No, the Alpha would want to punish me himself. He'd want to slowly destroy my mind and my body. He'd want to make an example of me for defying him.

Braxton Myles would take his time with me.

My heart hammered wildly, threatening to beat out of my chest. This was the dumbest fucking thing I'd ever done in my life. Instead of screaming in fear, I squeezed Daphne around the waist, whispering, "Whee! This is fun, huh?"

"Uh— Uh— Uh huh!" Her voice shook with cold.

Faint *yip* sounds reached my ears along with several loud barks, coming from the east side of the riverbank. A tiny trickle of relief pulled me back from the brink of total panic—that's where the goats had run off to. The skin-cell water bottle plan was working, the wolves were tracking the goats. It wouldn't be long until they found them, though, and then they'd have to try and pick up our real scent trail, which would be confusing, since the skin-cell water would be splashed all over the village by now, and Daphne and I were covered in petroleum jelly and traveling through rushing water. *Please work. Please.*

The river picked up speed; the water became choppy. "Hold on tight, Daphne!" I gripped her around the waist tighter as we bounced through some rapids. I held the little girl up on my legs to shield her from the bigger rocks that smashed into me, and after a tense, painful minute, the river grew narrow again, the water calmer and deeper.

The howls were everywhere now; I couldn't gauge where they were coming from. That probably meant that the wolves had found the goats, realized we'd tricked them with a fake trail, and they'd spread out, trying to pick up a fresh scent. Anxiety pulsed through me; it was terrifying to be able to hear the wolves, but not see them.

I thought furiously. We hadn't floated far enough yet—only about half a mile. We needed to get at least a mile down river, out of the pack's village boundary. I hadn't seen the river



when we drove in, which meant that it veered away from the road leading to Ironclaw. I hoped it didn't veer too far away.

God, this was a mistake. Although if I had to choose between dying of exposure in the California Badlands or being ripped apart by werewolves, I knew which one I'd prefer.

I held Daphne tighter. We picked up the pace again, the water flowing fast and deep, and she squeezed her makeshift life vest to her chest. The howls faded into the distance after another quarter mile; I took that to mean that we'd veered away from the village.

It would have to be enough. I couldn't risk it any longer; Daphne's body was shaking with cold, and her lips had gone a little blue. The girl was so damn skinny, she had almost zero body fat to protect her from the freezing water.

It was time to run.

"Okay." I tried to not shout over the gurgle of the water, just in case. "I think it's time to get out. Let's run a little to warm you up, okay?"

She nodded frantically, and I steered us over to a sandy patch on the riverbank. "Okay, stand up, and squeeze all the excess water out of your clothes while you're still in the river, okay?" I didn't want to give the wolves a scent explosion from where we exited the water. Daphne obeyed, diligently wringing out the threadbare t-shirt, while I quickly took off my own shirt and squeezed it as dry as I could, then put it back on. We emerged from the water; the petroleum jelly still slathered all over our skin. "Let's go!"

I cautiously peeked over the riverbank, and saw only dry rocky ground and scrubby bushes, leading all the way to the denser trees further up the mountain. We were out of sight of Ironclaw. The tiny stretch of gravel in the distance was the road in, though, and my heart leapt in my chest.

I knew where we were. We just had to follow that road back up the mountain a few miles, and hopefully...

*Hopefully*, they wouldn't chase us right into Castlemaine and drag us straight back.

Despair and panic threatened to overwhelm me for a second. This was nothing like the jobs I'd done as a kid as Ice Cold Killer Chloe. Back then, I could stay calm, because for one, the idea of getting caught wasn't necessarily unappealing. Nobody could do anything worse to me than what my father would do if he was mad at me. But now, I had this little girl's life in my hands. And if he caught me, Braxton Myles would torture me into insanity and break me completely to make an example of me.

*If he caught me.*

I pulled Daphne out of the water, and we began to run. The ground was littered with sharp rocks, but she didn't so much as whimper as we raced towards the road. We dashed straight over it, then followed a tiny game trail through some gigantic rock formations, leading up towards the mountain. We took cover where we could.

Another howl split the air; this one sounded closer. Damn it, they were checking the road out now; I had no idea if they'd caught our scent. All I could do was run.

We kept going. Daphne's panting became more ragged, her breath wheezing in her little chest. I was pulling on her hand more and more, until finally, I picked her up, slung her on my back, ordered her to hold on tight, and kept running.

Her tiny hands sandwiched together under my chin. She was still freezing, and the sun was edging down below the horizon now. Night was falling.

If we got lost out here, we were dead. If they caught us, we were dead. *God, we are dead.*

Frantically trying to remember the moon cycle, I figured that we might have a tiny sliver of waxing crescent moon once full dark came. It wouldn't be enough, but I forced the despair down and focused on one thing—putting one foot in front of the other.

One foot after another. My feet stomped on the rocky ground in time with the thump of my heart. My chest ached painfully after another mile, and it was only going to get

harder. Yaps and howls drifted from all around us; they were hunting us now, trying to follow our faint scent trail.

My vision tunneled; I kept going. The spare trees became thicker, and the incline became steeper as we ran straight up Castlemaine Mountain. *Just keep going. Just keep going.*

I prayed that the petroleum jelly did its job in keeping my scent stuck to my body. I prayed that the tiny game tracks I was trying to follow would confuse our scent. I prayed and prayed, hoping against hope that someone would hear me.

A frenzied barking came from below us; I cursed under my breath. They'd found a trail. Daphne let out a moan of terror.

"It's okay, sweetie," I said, patting her hand. "We're almost there." Just above us, only about half a mile away, was the crest of the west ridge, marking the border of Castlemaine.

Would the town protect us? Would the strange magic of the slipways hide us in the same way as they hid so many of the other townsfolk? All I could do was pray that it would.

The game trail beside the road became too thick, too overgrown; it was slowing me down. The wolves knew where we were, anyway; there was no point in taking cover. I had to make a run for it on more solid ground. I veered through the bush towards the dirt road. "Hold on!"

I ran as fast as I could. My chest felt like it was about to burst. The sun edged down beyond the horizon, and almost instantly, night fell, dramatically, like a heavy stage curtain at the end of a tragic play. We were almost there. The peak was right there.

A vicious howl tore the air behind me, then a savage snarl—so close now. Despair clawed at me. What the hell had I been thinking? Did I actually think the town would protect me? I was a fool.

A dead fool.

All I could do was pray and run.

My gasps became frantic, and I sprinted the last few hundred yards uphill, heading towards the border of

Castlemaine. There was a crash behind us—the sound of heavy branches snapping—and I turned just in time to see a huge monster crashing through the undergrowth. A werewolf ran through the game trail, chasing my scent. I clutched Daphne’s hands to my chest, and pushed, running up and over the ridge into Castlemaine.

Magic hit me, the energy of the nexus engulfed me, and I cried out loud. I could almost feel it inspecting me as I stumbled over the town’s border. Another crash came from behind me—two enormous, terrifying wolves, then three, snarling, barking. The sound of their claws ripping up the dirt track felt like knives on all my senses. They could see us.

Full darkness engulfed me suddenly, and a dark blanket spread across the sky above me for a fraction of a second. A wild wind tore through the trees around me, screaming in my ears and throwing me off balance. I whirled around in a circle, desperately trying to hold onto Daphne. Oh God, there they were, five huge wolves right behind us, sprinting up the hill towards us, snarling and snapping. The biggest one the size of a stallion, only a few yards away now, iron-gray, muzzle pulled back, his fangs glinting in the darkness, cold murder in his eyes. He was going to kill me slowly and enjoy every moment.

I was done. I had nothing left. I stopped running and turned to face my doom.

The storm around me suddenly imploded. The wind spun into a tornado, and the darkness coalesced, whirling into a solid form right in front of me. The storm was a man—a tall man with massive shoulders, dark hair loose and wild, dressed all in black like the night personified. Tension and danger radiated from him like a furnace.

The wolves skidded to a halt; their claws scoring the dirt road.

Malik Malleus looked down on them. “Watch the line, Alpha.”

## CHAPTER 6



*J* crouched and pulled Daphne off my back, keeping her behind me. “Stay quiet, okay?”

Her eyes were huge. I patted her, trying to calm my pounding pulse, and stood up, keeping well behind Malik.

He didn’t turn around. He didn’t even look at me. He was watching Braxton Myles change. The wolf’s body morphed effortlessly into human form, shimmering with an oily magic. He stood proudly, completely naked, his body slabbed with thick muscle and shining with sweat.

He pointed at me. “That’s my prisoner there behind you, Malleus,” he said, a growl in his voice. “I would appreciate you standing aside so I can take her.”

Malik tilted his head. “Your prisoner?”

“The woman. She’s mine.”

Silence stretched out between them. I couldn’t see Malik’s thoughts while he was facing the other way, but I could feel them. The brewing storm inside him was almost impossible to ignore.

Braxton, like Malik, kept his body still, his expression calm, but he was no less furious. The Alpha’s aura sparked red and black with vicious visions; him grabbing me by one leg and dragging me down the mountain all the way back to Ironclaw, my soft skin ripping on the rocky ground. Him chaining me up against the wall in a cell, naked, spread-eagled, helpless, defenseless. He could do whatever he wanted. He would take his time.

Finally, Malik unfroze. “She is not yours.”

“She stole something from me.” For a brief second, Braxton’s eyes flickered towards my face, and the blistering hate there almost scorched me. “Two things, now. She’s a thief, and I’ve caught her red-handed. She’s my prisoner, so she’s mine.”

Malik studied Braxton carefully. The other werewolves hadn’t shifted yet, instead, they paced back and forward behind their Alpha, growling menacingly, thin streams of spit dripping from their snarling muzzles. Braxton would only have to give the order, and they’d attack.

I held my breath and waited, my nerves stretched to breaking point. I had no idea how this was going to go down. Malik was insanely strong, exceptional at combat, and could dissolve into a shadow-beast form in an instant. He had a formidable reputation in the human world as a force to be reckoned with.

I did not know if he could beat five terrifyingly enormous werewolves in a fight.

And I had no idea if he’d even bother to defend me. Our deal was over—I’d found his precious brother like he demanded, and Malik had sent him back to their realm. For all I knew, he would toss me right back into Ironclaw territory and be done with me.

“What did she steal?”

“My battle goose,” Braxton snarled.

Malik cocked his head. “Are you referring to Lord De Wayne?”

“I don’t give a fuck what you call him. He’s big and white and vicious like a pit bull on meth.” Braxton rolled his meaty shoulders and spat on the ground. “He’s mine. We caught him, and somehow this bitch talked my guys into letting him out so she could get a good look at him. The damned thing killed my men, and she stole my goose and ran off with him.” Braxton’s gaze shifted; his eyes narrowed on me. “I want him back, and

I'm taking her as compensation for the death of four of my wolves."

Finally, Malik turned around slowly and looked at me. For the first time in a couple of days, I got to see his face.

I was never prepared for the shock of how blisteringly handsome he was. His beauty was unearthly, like a demigod, an ancient warlord king. Malik must be close to seven feet tall, with powerful wide shoulders wrapped in a skintight black tactical shirt, huge biceps bulging out of the short sleeves, forearms stacked with thick muscle. That broad chest, those powerful long legs in black combat pants and desert boots... He looked like a god-king wearing modern ballistics gear. His black hair was tousled, hanging loose around his face to his shoulders. His dark eyes gave a shimmering hint of the fire that burned within.

I was torn. I couldn't look away, and I couldn't keep looking at him. If I stared any longer, his gaze would consume me. I didn't trust myself to speak, so I didn't. I locked my knees to keep from trembling and lifted my chin, staring right past him towards the wolves, waiting for Malik to step aside and let them take me.

*Tell them I'm yours, a voice inside me pleaded. Tell them I belong to you, and you won't let me go.*

Malik Malleus's eyes burned into me for another long moment, then, finally, he turned back to face the wolves. "Lord De Wayne is not a creature you can possess, Alpha. He is not something you can steal. I know for a fact that this... *woman*"—his voice deepened, injecting a vibration of pure frustration into the word, and I shivered involuntarily—"does not keep him as a pet, because he is not a pet. No crime has been committed, so she is not a prisoner."

Braxton's jaw clenched. "Four of my men are dead."

"Perhaps you should take that up with Lord De Wayne."

The atoms between the three of us vibrated with tension. Braxton's nostrils flared, and he spat again on the ground. "Fine. We'll get him back; Buck probably has him locked up

now, anyway. But I'm still taking the bitch, Malleus. She's a criminal. She's stolen one of my pups."

My anger was starting to bubble out of control; I clenched my fists and locked my teeth, trying to stay calm.

"That's her, right there, see?" Braxton thrust his chin towards Daphne, shaking like a leaf behind me. "That bitch stole one of our pups right from under our noses. That's a crime, and she should be punished. Give her to me now."

Malik's broad shoulders slumped just a fraction. He exhaled heavily and muttered something in a foreign tongue. "You took this woman prisoner without fair cause, Alpha. It appears that she's taken a hostage and escaped, which is well within her rights."

I glanced down at Daphne. She stared back at me with her enormous eyes. Oh, a hostage. Yeah.

"I must admit," Malik went on. "I am surprised she managed to escape your pack boundaries. If it were me, right now, I'd be purely focused on making sure my security was up to standard so no one could escape again in the future."

Braxton's mouth twisted in fury. "I obviously underestimated her," he grunted.

"Well. We have that in common, at least. Since she has committed no crime, I cannot let you take her, Alpha."

A flash of yellow rolled over Braxton's eyes; he was on the verge of losing control. He took one deliberate step forward. "Don't you remember our bargain, Lord of Castlemaine?"

"I do. The bargain said nothing about prisoner exchange."

Braxton tilted his head, his cold blue eyes fixed on me. "Is she yours? You haven't claimed her. I didn't smell your scent on her."

"No." The word exploded from Malik's lips harshly. "She's not mine. I do not claim her."

My eyes flicked towards him involuntarily. That was... emphatic. Sweet Dumb Chloe slumped down inside of me and pouted.



*Shut the fuck up, I told her. This is not the time.*

“Regardless,” Malik went on. “She is a resident in my town, and I will not allow the residents of Castlemaine to be unfairly detained by anyone.”

Braxton let out a bark of laughter. “You’re not doing your job properly then. I know for a fact that some of your residents have gone missing recently.”

Despite my terror, my curiosity was pricked, and I wondered what he knew about it. Apparently, according to Nathaniel, a couple of gym members had gone missing lately. Although, as long as their direct debits kept going through, he wasn’t going to make a fuss. “You can’t keep your own house in order.” Braxton curled his lip.

“I am not a babysitter,” Malik replied mildly. “The creatures of Castlemaine’s lives are their own.”

“Fine.” Braxton clenched his fists, then jabbed a finger at me. “This isn’t over, bitch. I’ll have you, one way or the other. I’ll make you pay. When I’m done with you…” His lips curled up into a cold smile. “You’ll wish you came with me voluntarily. Because whatever you thought I was going to do to you before, now, it will be much much worse.” He turned back to Malik. “Give me my pup back, and I’ll be on my way.”

“No.” It was the first time I’d spoken.

Both men turned towards me. Malik cocked an eyebrow.

Braxton’s mouth twisted. “Bitch—”

“I said no. She doesn’t want to live in your pack, asshole. She’s not yours.”

“You dare—”

“Dare to what? Tell you to go fuck off? Yes, I do. Your ego is out of control, Braxton, and it’s about time someone told you so. You’re not a king. You’re just some arrogant wolf shifter who is good at getting idiots like them”—I thrust my chin towards the wolves pacing behind him—“to do your dirty work for you.” I eyeballed him steadily. If I could get him to

lose control, Malik wouldn't stand by and let him rip me to pieces. Or would he? Whatever. No matter what, I wasn't going back to Ironclaw with him, and I wasn't going to let Daphne leave with him, either. I'd rather die bleeding on this dirt road.

Braxton took a breath, visibly reigning in his fury. "Her momma lives in Ironclaw. She's one of mine."

I lifted my chin. "Then her momma can come and get her daughter back, if she wants her. I'm not sending this little girl off with a bunch of ugly dogs. I don't know them, and I don't know you. If Daphne's mom wants to come and pick her up, then she can come and get her from me." Then, I could punch her in the face until she lost all her teeth.

Braxton's face melted; his jaw lengthened. He was on the brink of shifting again. "She's *mine*," he snarled through a mangled jaw. "Both of them are *mine*."

I whipped out the Ruger from the small of my back and pointed it at him. "You don't own people." I lifted my chin along with the gun. "Nobody owns anyone. You think you can treat her like property, like a literal object?" I let out a bark of bitter laughter. "I dare you to step closer and say that again."

"You think that little toy will stop me, bitch? We're going to rip you apart."

"*Try* it."

He lunged at me, snapping his teeth. Malik moved sideways a fraction, just an inch, putting himself in front of me, blocking Braxton's advance deliberately.

That tiny move was all I needed. He *would* fight for me. An explosion of triumph and relief surged through my body.

We stared at each other in tense silence for a long, long moment, my chest heaving. "You're nothing, Braxton Myles. You're a coward. Why else would you have hidden your pack away behind Castlemaine? Why else would you sandwich it between Castlemaine and the Badlands, if you weren't terrified of Barbara Backman, the Shifter Queen?"

That oily magic rolled over his skin again; he was going to change.

Oops. Too far? Maybe.

I reached down and grabbed Daphne's hand. "We're done here. I'm going home." I turned my back and marched off, dragging Daphne behind me.

## CHAPTER 7



I didn't look back. I could hear vicious snarled words—a stream of loud curses—behind me. If he was going to attack me, Braxton could ambush me from behind like the coward he was.

Daphne tugged on my hand, trying to get my attention. I could still feel her hand shaking.

“Just keep walking,” I whispered. After a few moments, the voices melted off into the distance. They weren't chasing us.

Daphne tugged on my hand again, but I squeezed it, and put my fingers to my lips. A car was coming towards us, coming from Castlemaine. I could see it in the distance, the tires kicking up dust on the dirt road. Overcautious, entirely aware that I'd already pulled off a miracle and I might be pushing my luck, I yanked Daphne off the road, and we hid in the scrub, waiting for it to pass.

Daphne crouched in front of me and whispered in my ear. “There's something... dead in here.”

I glanced down at her. “What?”

“That's what I was trying to tell you. I can smell something dead here. A body,” she clarified.

“Where?”

She pointed. Still holding her hand, I edged over to a spot around twelve feet from the dirt road and peered through the

gloom. It was almost impossible to see very far in here without the faint glow of the moon.

Then, I spotted it—bone-white, sharply contrasted with the dark green scrub around it. The body was naked and humanoid. Not human, though. The limbs were an odd shape, and there were strange barky patches on the skin.

I edged closer. It didn't smell to me, but then again, I didn't have enhanced olfactory senses like Daphne. The wind shifted, bringing the smell of death towards me. I hesitated for a second, then crept closer.

It was the body of a woman. She was naked, face up, her eyes wide open. A wild mane of sandy blonde hair tangled around her head, flowing over the ground underneath her. Her body was crisscrossed with cuts, some wide open and raw, some long scars sealed shut by what looked like glue.

I peered at her face and was shocked when I recognized her. She worked at the Hare and Hound, the bar across the road from the Flex Factory, a pretty English-style pub. She was a nymph, I thought, a dryad, judging by her skin. Some sort of forest elemental.

I examined her body from a distance. No bruises or bite marks, just deep cuts and slices all over her body. One of her eyes had been removed; the empty socket looked wet and grisly beneath the half-open lid. She looked like she'd been abducted by aliens and dumped back on the ground, just inside the border of Castlemaine.

Daphne squeezed my hand. "What happened to her?" She sounded curious rather than scared.

"I don't know." I ran my eyes over the body again, slowly, and began to edge away. "You don't need to see this, Daphne. Don't look."

"I've seen worse."

Her flat tone made me want to cry. "You shouldn't have." I moved her back a little. "I'm sorry, honey. No little girl should have to see stuff like this." Not even me, who had inflicted those kinds of wounds herself as a little girl.

She cocked her head, listening. “The car has stopped.”

That meant whoever was in it was looking for us. “Do you know who it is?”

She sniffed through her nostrils tentatively. “A man. He smells just like the man who saved us.”

One of Malik’s brothers, probably. It should be safe. “Come on.” I pulled her through the scrub again, and we emerged on the dirt road.

A matte-black armored SUV idled right in front of us. The window whirred, rolling down. There, in the driver’s seat, sat Malik’s littlest brother.

I’d only ever seen him from a distance once—he’d lurked in the doorway on the castle wall the first time I’d met them—but I sensed the familiarity with Malik, that velvety dark energy that lingered in the air. Where Malik felt like wild, savage passion, and Mavri, the only other brother I’d met, felt like base lust, this man felt... well, a little dopey, to put it crudely.

Compared to the heightened adrenaline I’d felt during the confrontation with the wolves, it felt nice to bask in this brother’s essence. His skin was white, his hair was a pile of soft curls, lighter brown than the others, and he had an almost cherubic cheeky face, still shockingly handsome, but more serene, less brutally masculine than Malik was.

This brother reminded me of Cupid. No, it wasn’t that, not exactly. He reminded me of the dumb feeling you got when you were shot with Cupid’s arrow. Like nothing else mattered. I’d never felt that way before, but Sweet Chloe had. Many, many times.

I walked tentatively over to the car window. “Hi.”

He smiled a slow, sleepy smile. “I should have guessed it was you who needed a ride.”

“What do you mean?”

“When Malik told me to bring a car up here—he doesn’t need one. I should have known it was for you.”

I wasn't sure what to say to that, so I left it alone. "I'm Chloe."

"Dashiel." He smiled a dazzling, love-filled grin that made me feel squirmy. I squashed it down easily; I needed my wits about me.

"He's beautiful," Daphne breathed out beside me.

"He is," I told her. "But it's not real. He's not human, sweetie."

"Is he a god?"

"Kind of. He's a concept, like an emotion. He's like a little god... a fractured god, a piece of something much bigger." Dashiel, like Mavri, was a splinter of the Lover archetype.

Daphne's little mouth hung open for a moment; she gazed at Dashiel with enormous eyes. "I think I love him."

"He's making you feel like that. That's what he is; he's that dumb feeling you get when you fall in love."

Dashiel chuckled. "That's not entirely accurate, but I suppose it's as good a translation as you can get." His laugh faded slowly; he sniffed, then wrinkled his nose. "You hauling dead bodies around with you?"

"There's a dead body in the bushes," I told him.

He raised an eyebrow.

"I know what you're thinking," I added, holding up my hand. "It wasn't me. I just stumbled on it. Can we please take it back down to Castlemaine?" I needed to figure out what happened to this poor girl and get her back to her family. Her injuries are so bizarre...

With a jolt, I realized I'd seen similar cuts on another dead body, just this morning. The brownie that washed up on the lake outside my cottage had similar slices on his naked body. One body might be an accident. Two was a conspiracy.

Dashiel shrugged. "Sure." He popped the trunk and stepped out of the car. He pulled a body bag out of the back and handed it to me. "Here."

I opened my mouth and shut it again. I had a body bag in my trunk, too. It was folded up and disguised as a hold-all, but it was still a body bag. They came in really handy.

Holding my nose, I ventured back into the scrub, and gently tipped the dead girl into the bag, dispassionately checking the rest of her body as I worked.

She was a mess of cuts. Someone had even sliced one of her calf muscles off her leg. I'd seen plenty of dead bodies in my life but detaching myself from what I was looking at was harder than it used to be. Damn Sweet Chloe and her soft heart.

I knew this girl. I didn't know her name, but I remembered seeing her face the first and only time I popped my head into the Hare and Hound. She was someone's daughter, someone's friend. She'd had a life, and now, it was gone. I'd take her back to Castlemaine and figure out what happened to her.

It was a good thing she was small, because I was exhausted. It took me a few minutes to drag her body out of the scrub. Dashiell helped me place her gently in the trunk, and I gave Daphne a boost into the backseat. "Can you take me back to my place?"

"I think my brother expects to see you," Dashiell said, a smile curling his lips. "I know he wants to speak with you. He's been looking for you, you know."

I swallowed. What did that mean? "So, you're taking me back to the spooky Dracula castle?"

"Yes."

"No." I unclipped my belt. "Daphne has been through enough; I'm not dragging her into some bloodsuckers' lair."

"We don't drink blood," Dashiell laughed.

"You guys were the inspiration for the original vampires. That story must have come from somewhere."

"Oh, it did." He winked at me.

I waited, but he didn't elaborate. "What does that mean?" I demanded.



“I don’t know if I should tell you,” he chuckled. “Malik hates that story. But I’ll tell you this—Malik doesn’t drink blood, but he’s never had any problem with.... licking it, if you know what I mean.”

Heat flooded my cheeks. “Forget I asked.”

Dashiel laughed. “You wanted to know. Malik got a reputation back in the fourth century for his dedication to female pleasure. At *any* time, if you know what I mean. The blood drinking stereotype came from there.”

“Okay, I got it,” I mumbled, covering my face with my hands. My skin suddenly felt too hot. “But I’m still not going to the castle. Can you take me home? Let me get Daphne settled.”

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

“He’ll find you if he wants you.” He gave me a grin. “I shouldn’t annoy him; he’s been very frustrated lately.”

“Do you mean more rage-filled than normal?”

Dashiel laughed but didn’t say anything else. He drove slowly down the hill, heading back towards Castlemaine.

Daphne wedged herself into my side, blinking sleepily. I forgot that kids go to bed so early. The sun had just set; she’d be tired after all that running. I put my arm around her and held her close. Poor kid.

I cleared my throat, turning my attention back to Dashiel. He was surprisingly forthcoming with information, so I decided to take the opportunity to quiz him while I could. “Braxton Myles referred to a deal he had with Malik. What’s that about?”

He shrugged. “You know we’re looking for our lost siblings, right? We’ve gotten most of them from all around the world, but it’s hard to locate them the closer we are to the slipway nexus. Their energy is too scattered so it’s hard to tell where the essence is coming from. We can’t sense their energy unless their human shell is starting to crumble.”

“You mean, if their life is in danger?”

“Yeah. That’s why he suddenly got frantic to find Kanaim; we could all sense that his shell was vulnerable, and his essence was starting to leak everywhere. We thought it was Baron, and he had cancer, or something like that, but then you found him as that kid on the cross. Thanks for that, by the way.” He turned and gave me the thumbs-up. “But the further away you get from the slipways, the easier it is to pinpoint our sibling’s energy. We’ve been all over the world,” he said. “And we’ve got almost all of them. There’s less than forty to go now, and most of them are close by.”

I nodded. “Okay. What does that have to do with Braxton Myles?”

“He had one in his pack—one of our siblings. Turns out, a pack shaman fingered him during one of Ironclaw’s rituals, said he wasn’t a human spirit, he was something else.”

“Who was he?”

“An aspect of the Lover, like us. Submission, I think, is the best word for it. He was an Omega in Ironclaw, living his best life.”

I nodded. That would actually make sense, having the essence of submission in Ironclaw. It would have made it easier for Braxton Myles to get his pack members to obey him. It was probably why no one had escaped and petitioned the Shifter Queen for help just yet. “Okay. Go on.”

“So, the Alpha contacted Malik to ask him if he’d lost something. They talked, and Braxton promised to return our brother, as long as Malik never set foot in Ironclaw, and left them alone. It wasn’t exactly a deal. It was more of a gentleman’s agreement. Malik takes it seriously.”

I frowned, thinking it all over. It made sense now, why they stood so firmly on the Ironclaw side of the ridge. While he was in his territory, Malik couldn’t lay a finger on him.

We drove for a while in silence, back over the west ridge of the mountain. On the way down, I spotted a familiar tall red-headed man, his bright hair a shining beacon in the

darkness, striding up a walking trail, heading in the direction of the giant castle sprawled over the peak of the mountain. Looks like the lost Scottish explorer was still alive. Good for him.

We followed the winding road slowly through the trees, headed towards the main streets of Castlemaine. Daphne and I lurched forward in our seats as Dashiell hit the brakes. I looked up, alarmed.

Malik Malleus was standing in the middle of the road.

My breath left my lungs in a rush. He was so beautiful, so terrifyingly handsome; his black combat pants and tight black t-shirt seemed almost incongruous. He should be wearing leather and furs and galloping on horseback through a windy moor at midnight.

His dark eyes were flashing with rage.

“Uh oh,” Dashiell said cheerfully. “We’re in trouble.”

Malik stalked towards the SUV, opened the back door, and climbed in, fixing me with his penetrating stare.

“A magnet for monsters,” he growled. “You, woman, are a magnet for monsters. Castlemaine is filled with normal people, you know, some human, some not, but most are peaceful and just want to live their lives authentically. But *you*.” His voice took on a harsh edge. “Somehow, within a week, you have managed to attract three of the most vicious men in town and kill one of them. Even I was unable to penetrate Methusela Baron’s defenses, yet you strolled in and murdered him like it was nothing.”

I kept quiet. All of my power stemmed from being underestimated. It made me nervous when people saw through me. The snarly, tangled images in Malik’s thoughts grew wild and savage; the air in the car suddenly vibrated with danger.

“Braxton Myles is now fixated on you,” he growled. “I don’t know how you infiltrated his pack and stole this child from him. I don’t know why—”

Indignation stung me. “Ironclaw is a death camp,” I snapped, interrupting him rudely. “Braxton Myles is a tyrant.

Daphne is an innocent child, and she doesn't deserve to grow up in a place like that."

"That's not for you to decide."

"It's not for *you* to decide either." I slipped my hands over Daphne's ears, just in case she was still awake and listening. "I'm sick of all this ownership bullshit. She just left a cult, Malik. Methusela Baron treated all those members like they were his toys to play with, and Braxton Myles is exactly the same."

"She has a mother—"

"Her mother doesn't own her either." I clenched my jaw, suddenly so furious I could explode. "Daphne doesn't even know me, but I was the first person to ask her what she wanted. And what she *wanted* was to come with me. Me, a total stranger! She wanted to leave her mother and escape Ironclaw with me, knowing there was a good chance we both might die, and if Braxton caught us, we'd both be tortured as punishment. But she wanted to come with me. That was her decision. From now on, Daphne gets to decide what is good for her, and nobody else."

The Vampire Lord studied me in silence for a moment. "Braxton Myles is not concerned with her." He let out a low, manly frustrated grunt, deep in his chest. "This will end in death."

"As long as it's his." I crossed my arms over my chest. "Then I'm fine with it."

"I am sworn not to enter Ironclaw."

I lifted my chin. "I don't care what you do."

He opened his mouth; then paused. Those thick brows furrowed for a second. "Is there a dead body in the trunk?"

"Sure is."

There was a loaded silence. "Did you want to tell me *why* there is a dead body in the trunk?"

"It's the bartender from the Hare and Hound. I found her off the roadside, just this side of the ridge." I leaned forward.

“She’s covered in odd cuts and slices.”

“Hmm.” He looked away, his heavy brow furrowing. Malik was deep in thought.

“She’s not the first person who has gone missing from Castlemaine lately, is she?”

“No.” He exhaled wearily. “I have received word that a handful of residents have mysteriously disappeared in the last two weeks.”

“Was one of them a brownie?”

Malik nodded once. “Sammy. His disappearance was reported to me a week ago.”

“He washed up on my lawn this morning. Same cuts, same type of weird amputations.”

He cursed under his breath; a string of ancient swear words that sounded like poetry in my ears. “There was another who resurfaced—a local old warlock. I found his body on the outskirts of Castlemaine yesterday. Some of his organs had been removed.”

“Oh. So, there’s a serial killer on the loose in Castlemaine?”

He gave me a look.

“Yeah, yeah,” I waved my hand. “There are lots of killers in Castlemaine. You know what I mean, Malik. There’s someone abducting people in the town and cutting them up in weird ways.”

“So it would seem,” he muttered.

“Were you planning on doing anything about it?”

“Hear this, woman,” he said gruffly. “The entire world is on the brink of destruction. I am wholly consumed with locating my siblings and returning them before the Lightbringers come through the slipway nexus and bring about the apocalypse. Besides, I assumed it was your friend who was responsible for the murders, and I have been mulling over how to proceed.”

“No.” I pursed my lips. “Dwayne wouldn’t—”

“Not that friend.”

“Oh. Well, Jeb is just—”

“Not that one, either.” His eyes found me again, the darkness in his eyes lifting a little.

I stared at him. “You mean Sarah?”

“If you mean the poltergeist, then, yes.”

“No.” I shook my head firmly. Sarah was now almost a permanent feature on my sofa; she spent whole days and nights glued to the TV. When I first saw her in my front yard, I assumed she was nothing more than a slightly weird little kid, homeschooled by technophobic parents. I had no idea that she wasn’t alive.

“It’s not her. Sarah isn’t a murderer.”

Malik arched one brow. “That creature is the most malevolent, destructive force in the whole of Castlemaine. She has leveled buildings and torn up hard-packed pavement. She has fractured bones and concussed several residents.”

“She’s just a girl. She’s a ghost, sure, but she’s not a malevolent creature.” I sat back in my seat. “Besides, there’s two sides to every story. I’m sure the person whose house she destroyed probably deserved it.”

The hard line of his lips softened slightly. “What kind of woman makes friends with violent poltergeists?”

“The kind of woman that doesn’t judge a book by its cover.” I didn’t know Sarah’s story, but I didn’t need to know it, either. She’d tell me when she was ready. “She’s a perfectly respectable houseguest,” I added primly. “She hasn’t so much as even moved a pillow in my house.”

I had noticed that whenever a topic came up that might upset her, Sarah chose to simply disappear rather than succumb to rage when she was in my house. She promised she wouldn’t break anything, and so far, she’d stuck to it.

I knew how destructive she could be, though. There were ruined shells of houses dotted all around Lakeside Drive. The only time we'd spoken about her nature, she told me she couldn't help it. When she got upset, the pain became unbearable and the only way she could process it was to explode. She turned into a storm and wiped out everything in her path. The two vampires that lived a few doors down from me even had a little shrine on their porch with offerings for her, as if she was some sort of deity they had to appease.

"Regardless," Malik's low, rumbling voice brought me back to the present. "I assumed it was her."

"It's not. The body I found had surgical incisions. One of her calf muscles has been methodically sliced off. I didn't examine the brownie, but Sammy looked like he had similar cuts. It's definitely not the work of a poltergeist."

Malik brooded silently for a moment, then grunted. "The mystery will have to wait until tomorrow. I have something else we must urgently take care of."

"We?"

"Yes. You must come with me now, woman."

"Why?"

"A rare stroke of luck," he said. "One of my siblings has just been reborn in a human body. He is close, in a hospital in Long Beach. We must hurry, though—his body is weak, which is why I can sense him. He may die soon and disappear into the cycle of rebirth, and I may not be able to locate him in time."

"Well... Why do you need me?"

A muscle in his jaw ticked. "I cannot tell which child it is. There are dozens of babies in that hospital, and most are asleep."

"I suppose you can't go around poking babies awake so you can look them in the eyes."

"Indeed. I need you to go and view the thoughts of these newborns and find the one who may be my brother."

“It would help if I knew what I was looking for. What brother is this? What fractured god is he?”

“You might know him as a splinter of the Ruler archetype. We call him Pleonexy.”

“Sounds like a peach,” I murmured, recognizing the etymology of the word. “Well, first I’m taking Daphne back to my house. I need to let Nathaniel know I’ve got his awful sister’s kid with me, because I’m sure he’s going to want to know. Then, I have to track down the bartender’s family and hand her body over—”

“There’s no time,” he cut me off. “We must go to the hospital now.” His hard jaw grew impossibly more masculine.

I stared into his eyes for a long time, losing myself in his burning hot gaze, sinking in, as if I hoped to drown there. Idly, I wondered how far I could push him until he snapped and broke me.

I’d gone my whole childhood wondering if the head of Hellix would pop up out of nowhere and kill me. It wasn’t an irrational fear; I deserved it. In my former life as a child assassin, I’d killed two bodies he was supposed to be guarding. I ruined two big assignments and dented Hellix’s reputation, so I expected him to come after me at some point.

It wasn’t irrational. And it wasn’t even a fear. It wasn’t a nightmare; it was a dream. My whole life I wanted to die, and the sweetest way I could think of to go would be with Malik Malleus’ hands around my neck, with me gazing deep into his eyes as he choked the life out of me.

Yes, I needed therapy.

The old dream still lingered, apparently. “No,” I said bluntly, turning away. “Daphne first, then we deal with the dead girl in the trunk. Then, I’ll help you.”

I waited, my heart pounding in my chest. After a long moment, he cursed under his breath, a long, low mutter of words that sounded like music.

“Fine,” he growled.



## CHAPTER 8



I found Dwayne in the backyard, building a little sculpture out of what looked like human bones, piling them up in a fancy arrangement in between the lemon trees.

“That’s impressive,” I nodded at it. “Very artistic, Dwayne. I like how you’ve made little daisy patterns out of the knucklebones.”

He honked with pleasure and did a little skip on his webbed feet, pushing a femur bone into the ground and plopping a skull on top of it. The skull’s teeth were still intact; they looked wonky, yellow and familiar.

Well, hello there, Buck. “I’m guessing that was the werewolf who tried to ambush you?”

Dwayne nodded.

“Nice. How’d you strip the bones so quickly?”

A whirl of images solidified in his thoughts, and Dwayne showed me what happened when he arrived home at dusk. The werewolf Buck hid in the house, waited until Dwayne had waddled inside and rushed at him, trying to wrestle him into the cage. In Dwayne’s thoughts, he grew to a terrifyingly big size, picked Buck up by the leg and smashed him into the ground over and over, dragged him outside, then tossed him like a hammer into the lake. Thirty seconds later, a full skeleton, completely stripped of all skin and muscle, came flying out of the water, almost knocking him over. Dwayne was weirdly angry about that.

I watched, frowning. “Okay.... I’m glad you weren’t caught again, buddy, but did you not worry where I was?”

Dwayne shrugged. He had been too busy to worry about me. He showed me a vision of himself punching a curvy red-haired woman in the face with a balled-up wing.

“Dwayne!” I scolded. “What the hell?”

He let out a goosey snigger. I didn’t recognize the beautiful red-headed woman in his thoughts, but according to him, she totally deserved to get beaten up.

I sighed and scrubbed my face with my hands. I had enough to deal with right now. “Please... just don’t kill anyone. There might be a serial killer operating in Castlemaine, and I don’t want you to get the blame for it.”

He honked, showing me that he didn’t kill the redhead. They just got into a vicious, bloody brawl, that’s all. And, he emphasized, she totally deserved it.

“Fabulous,” I sighed. “Come inside, buddy. I want you to meet someone.”

He dumped the rest of the bone collection on the ground, and we walked inside.

Dwayne’s eyes lit up when he spotted Daphne. “No,” I told him firmly. “She’s not for eating; she’s for guarding.”

Dwayne gave a sad honk.

“This is Daphne; she’s Nathaniel’s niece. Can you watch her for me for a couple of hours? Malik Malleus needs me to go somewhere with him.”

Daphne watched us with huge eyes, taking tiny bites of the cheese sandwich I’d thrown together when we first walked in the cottage. The poor kid looked like she’d been starved half to death. I had to ask Malik to wait in the car so she might relax a little away from his terrifying presence.

“I’ll watch her.” Sarah’s strange, multi-tonal voice piped up from the sofa. I glanced over. A little girl in a bright-white dress suddenly materialized out of nowhere.

“Thanks. I’ve got a couple of things I need to do, then I’m headed to Long Beach with Malik to try to find one of his siblings...” I trailed off, rummaging in my drawer for another phone. Braxton Myles had taken mine, but I had a nice little stock of burner phones. “Actually, Sarah... while you’re here.” I tried to keep my voice casual. “Have you heard anything about any missing people in Castlemaine lately? We came across the body of one of the bartenders at the Hare and Hound, she’s got some weird cuts on her.”

Sarah didn’t turn away from the T.V. “No. I don’t think so.”

I waited a moment, but she didn’t say anything else. Mentally, I crossed her off my list of potential suspects. The wounds on both of the bodies weren’t something a violent poltergeist would make, and, like Dwayne, if Sarah had done it, she’d probably have no reservations in telling me all about it. “Okay, if you hear anything, will you let me know?”

“Okay.”

Daphne was staring at me strangely. “Oh, I forgot,” I said, turning back to the sofa. “Daphne can’t see you, Sarah. She doesn’t know you’re there, so keep that in mind when you’re watching her.”

It wouldn’t hurt to appeal to the poltergeist’s sense of empathy, just in case. I walked to stand behind Daphne and put my hands over her ears so she couldn’t hear me. “Daphne’s had a really rough life so far, so please go easy on her. She grew up in Methusela Baron’s cult, and I’ve just rescued her from Ironclaw.” I lowered my voice. “When we first walked in the cottage, I showed her the bedroom and told her I’d find a space for her to sleep. She got in the closet and curled into a ball on the floor, like it was routine for her.”

My heart nearly damn broke when Daphne did that. I left her in there for ten minutes while I had a mini-breakdown, silently screaming, tears pouring down my cheeks.

Sarah finally pulled her eyes away from the T.V. and turned towards us. A strange expression came over her face.

The atoms in the air vibrated for a second, then Daphne let out a soft gasp.

“Hello,” Sarah said.

Daphne swallowed. “Hello.”

Sarah patted the sofa. “Come watch with me.”

“Okay.” Tentatively, Daphne crept closer. “I’ve never seen a T.V. before.”

I left the room before I burst into tears. I had to hurry anyway; we were on a tight time frame. Before I left, I quickly ducked next door to check in with Meadow, my neighbor, a witchy earth-mama type who always seemed to have a billion children crawling all over every surface. I asked her to keep an eye out for any trouble and call me if something weird came up. Meadow hugged me several times and promised, with an odd fanatical light in her eye, that she would keep an ear out for Daphne and protect her with her life. Meadow was weird and intense, but nice enough. I was slowly getting used to her. I patted her awkwardly until she released me and hurried back outside.

Malik waited for me there, leaning against the car with his arms crossed over his chest, a picture of impatient frustration. I half-expected to see thunder clouds gathering over his head. “Okay, we can go. She’s all settled.”

He arched an eyebrow. “With the murderous goose and the hellhound guarding her?”

“No,” I said haughtily, sticking my nose in the air. “The violent poltergeist is guarding her, actually. The hellhound isn’t here yet, but the murderous goose is setting up for their poker night now.”

He exhaled heavily and opened the car door. “Let’s go.”

“Okay. We just have to pop into the bar to talk to Nancy, and then I’ll come with you.” Nancy, the young witch gym member, would definitely know the dead girl since they worked together.

“Do I have to remind you that the whole fate of the earth is in my hands?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’ve got a whole year to find the rest of your siblings. We can take ten minutes to return the dead girl and maybe try to find the Castlemaine killer, Malik.”

“You could start with checking your living room,” he muttered.

“People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones, oh mighty Vampire Lord.” I climbed back in the car and asked Dashiell to drive us to the Hare and Hound.

## CHAPTER 9



In London, there are pubs which are so old you have to duck your head to get through the low doorways. Not because people were much shorter back then, which was a common misconception. It was mostly because long pieces of timber were really expensive. And it made the people feel safer, knowing that giant Viking raiders would struggle to get through their doors if they ever came to rape and pillage.

Walking through these tiny entrances in London always felt like traveling through a portal to another dimension, and the Hare and Hound was exactly the same. This bar felt like it had been scooped up from a bustling backstreet in the late eighteen-hundreds and plopped down between the grocery store and a stationery shop on Main Street. There were no windows, just one tiny door. I slipped out of the car, ducked my head, and went inside.

Loud music and bellowing voices hit my ears. I waited a second for my eyes to adjust to the dim lights, crept down the stairs through another low doorway, and looked around.

The place was packed. I was surprised, considering the street outside was fairly deserted, but everything about Castlemaine was a little odd. I waved to Nancy, bustling away behind the bar, pulling a beer for two very short men perched on the barstools in front of her.

She brushed her black bangs off her very white forehead, gave me a hurried smile, put the foaming drinks down in front of the men, and turned to me. “Hey, Chloe. Have you managed

to program Kelly's keycard yet? We were looking for you earlier; you kinda disappeared."

"Uh, no. Sorry. I got abducted by werewolves."

Her black-ringed eyes narrowed. "Your skin looks suspiciously moisturized. You went to the spa, didn't you?"

"It's petroleum jelly," I told her. I hadn't had a chance to shower; I'd just thrown my "all purpose" outfit on before heading out—designer jeans and a plain t-shirt. "Listen, Nancy. I've got bad news, I'm afraid. Are you guys missing a bartender?"

She sighed. "We are very short staffed, but that's nothing new." Her thoughts were scattered; she was thinking about what a pain in the ass her job was, and how she was desperate to go and meet her new partner, Kelly. There was a touch of avarice in her thoughts—the older woman had money, and Nancy wanted it.

I still hadn't made up my mind about Nancy. The idea that she was only with Kelly for her money made me like her a whole lot less. "Has someone not shown up for work lately?" I didn't know the dead girl's name.

"Kaia hasn't shown up for any of her shifts for the past week. I'm not surprised though," Nancy huffed, digging into the ice bucket with force. "That girl is a total slut."

I suppressed my frown. "What do you mean by that?"

"She keeps propositioning couples she meets here, and she goes home with them without cashing out her till or doing any of her closing procedures." Her lip curled. "She gets away with it because she's the boss's niece."

"Is Kaia a tall girl, textured skin, long tangled dark blonde hair?" She nodded. "I'm so sorry, Nancy. We just found her body in the woods earlier this evening."

Nancy gasped and whirled away from me. "You better tell Jackie. That's him over there on the barstool." She nodded towards a tiny man sitting on a very high chair by the door.

I hadn't noticed him when I walked in, which was unusual. I normally noticed everything. The man looked ancient, with very wrinkled copper-colored skin and bristly brown hair on top of his head, sticking up in all directions. A dark gray tunic covered most of his little body.

"Kaia was his niece," Nancy added.

My heart skipped a beat. Malik was already there, looming over little Jackie. A surge of annoyance regulated my pulse quickly, though; the Vampire Lord of Castlemaine could have just told me who the best person to speak to was. Of course, Malik would know Kaia was a dryad. He already knew who her elders were.

I walked over. Malik moved away as I approached, choosing to lurk menacingly in a dark doorway instead.

The little man sat very still on his high stool. I couldn't tell if he was looking at me or not; his face was so wrinkled, I couldn't see his eyes. "You found my Kaia," he said in a voice that sounded like tree bark rubbing together.

"I'm sorry for your loss, sir."

He sighed; it was more of a low vibration than a sound. Jackie looked nothing like Kaia; he must be full-blooded dryad. He reminded me of an ancient bonsai tree, sitting here on his stool by the front door, displayed like a carefully pruned, majestic tiny oak tree. Even his arms and legs were gnarled and bark-like. "I must admit, when she disappeared, I feared the worst," he went on. "Kaia, unfortunately, is young and foolish."

"Do you have any idea when she went missing? Or what happened to her?"

He shook his head, a tiny movement. "Her last shift was exactly a week ago; I haven't seen her since. She was supposed to be back at work two days later, but she never came in."

"Did you look for her?"

"I went to her house—I bought her a little one-bedroom unit on Willow Drive—but there was no sign of her. None of



her things were missing and nothing was broken or messy. She left here last Saturday and just... disappeared.”

I surveyed his thoughts carefully. Despite being outwardly unmoved, Jackie felt devastated at the loss of his niece. “Do you have any idea what might have happened to her? Was there anyone suspicious hanging around?”

“There were many people around her, all the time.” He thought for a moment, but none of the faces in his mind seemed to stand out as suspicious. “Kaia was very generous with her affections,” he whispered. “It was one of the reasons she came to live here with me in Castlemaine. She adored her human lovers, but she did not like hiding her true nature, so she was headed for disaster living in a normie world. Castlemaine let her be the thing that she is—a nature spirit in a human body.” His thoughts grew more distressed. I could barely see his eyes, but in his thoughts, he was wailing in misery.

He had no idea what had happened to her. I reached out and touched the hard skin on his forearm. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Malik emerged from the darkness. “My brother will bring your niece to your abode, old one,” he said to Jackie. “We must go.” He eyed me pointedly, and stalked out, bowing at the waist as he stepped through the low door.

I looked around the bar one more time before I left, carefully cataloging the odd assortment of people inside. I recognized Jerry and Terry, my vampire neighbors, from an article I’d read in the Castlemaine Gazette. Both wore matching bow ties and patterned shirts and sipped on Bloody Marys in a booth. A handful of haggard-looking witches huddled over their old-fashioned cocktails at the bar while Nancy eyed them, visibly annoyed. Or maybe that was just her goth makeup.

Debbie, the terrifyingly perky dance teacher from the gym, was having a very animated discussion with an odd-looking young human man, an enormous mustache covering most of the lower part of his face. In an armchair by the roaring fire,

the Countess Ebadoratheia Greenwood elegantly sipped a glass of champagne. The people around her watched her warily. But nobody was thinking of abducting innocent people and making weird surgical slices in their skin—not even her.

I sighed and walked out the door.

There were so many odd, dangerous creatures in this damned town. How would I find a murderer in a town full of killers?

## CHAPTER 10



Malik waited for me outside, dark and menacing in the dim streetlights. He crossed his huge arms over his chest and leaned back against the SUV, somehow managing to make the huge vehicle look like a Mini-Cooper. “Have you apprehended the murderer?”

“What?” I frowned. “No, of course not.”

His dark eyes narrowed. “None of the people in the bar are responsible for the dryad’s death?”

I shook my head. “Did you really expect me to wander into a bar and find the murderer within twenty minutes?”

“Of course. You are skilled in investigation and logical deduction. You understand how the mind of a killer works, and you know exactly who would fit the profile without disregarding other suspects. You have the ability to read thoughts—not necessarily a gift—and you do not seem to be fooled by false fantasies.”

I checked to see if he was mocking me, but to my surprise, his thoughts were sincere. I opened my mouth, and shut it again, unsettled. “I think you’re overestimating my abilities a little.”

“You escaped from Ironclaw with a shifter child in tow,” he replied, his gorgeous dark eyes fixed on my face. “You fooled a whole pack of werewolves and made it out of their stronghold unscathed.”

“Thanks to you.”

“Regardless.” He watched my face, assessing me almost hungrily. “Your skillset is... remarkable.” He shifted on his feet, straightening up. “We must go.”

“Okay.” I nodded towards the car. The driver’s seat was empty. Dashiell had disappeared, probably to take Kaia’s body to her uncle’s place, so I guess Malik must be driving. “After you.”

He shook his head. “We will fly there. There is no time for anything else.”

Uh oh. I backed away, suddenly uncomfortable. Flying with Malik meant being cocooned in his shadow-beast form. It was terrifying, overwhelming, and a whole lot of other sensations I didn’t want to ruminate on right now. “I don’t think so.”

“I am not asking.”

“You *should* be asking.” I backed away further, and he followed, looming over me, the hard line of his jaw suddenly tight.

My legs began to shake. Being wrapped up in his shadow-form felt like bondage; like submission in the presence of his blistering, overwhelming dominance. “Have you ever heard of consent, Malik?”

“I do not need to ask.” He moved closer, inhaling through his nose. “I can feel your consent.”

He exploded into darkness. Shadows engulfed me, wrapping me tightly, and his voice vibrated through me as if he were buried deep inside me. “You forget who I am.”

I gasped, my back arching as I was lifted off my feet, suddenly weightless. The feel of him surrounding me pressed in on all sides, restraining me, binding me so I couldn’t move... It was both terrifying and comforting, exhilarating and soothing. Tension drained from my muscles, but I felt electrified at the same time, somehow both helpless and stronger than I’d ever felt before. After a long moment, I surrendered to the sensations that thrummed through me.

This was different from the other times he'd carried me in his shadow-wing form. The first time, he'd snatched me up not knowing who or what I was, and his essence had bled directly through to me, a wild, savage anger tempered with a hint of curious excitement.

But now... I felt so much more. My eyes rolled back in my head, pleasure singing throughout my body as he carried me through the air, bound completely, wrapped up in his shadow-beast form.

It felt like only a few minutes later when he gently tipped me onto a solid surface, perfectly arranging me so my feet touched the ground first. I straightened up, mentally threw a bucket of cold water over my head, and peered around at the concrete cavern around me. "Where are we?"

"In the parking lot of Long Beach Women's Hospital," he said, straightening up a few feet away from me. "This is where Pleonexy is, in this building somewhere." He said his brother's name with an odd accent, as if speaking in the original Greek, which he probably was.

But I understood it. Pleonexy was a word related to the desire to possess things that belong to others, by any means necessary. It was avarice, covetousness. Greed.

"I cannot pinpoint his exact location," Malik added. "I have viewed all the babies I have been able to, and I cannot tell where he might be."

"Okay." I bit my lip, thinking about Malik looming menacingly over a baby's bassinet, terrifying all the midwives. No wonder he needed me. "If Pleonexy reincarnated in the body of a baby, and you can feel him, I'm guessing that means his shell is crumbling quickly. And if his body is vulnerable, he'll be in the neonatal intensive care unit." That meant extra security, which didn't bother me. It was the nurses that were the problem; they were too sharp, intuitive, and suspicious by nature. This was going to be hard.

We took the stairwell up to the ground level of the hospital, emerging into the bright lights of the main entrance. Despite the fact that it was after eight at night, the hospital seemed

busy; patients ambled slowly through the atrium, supported by family members and friends, scrub-wearing men and women rushed from one door, disappearing through another. Security milled around—mostly bored men watching the clock, waiting for their shift to end. I marched forward with purpose, heading towards the maternity ward, checking the signs for neonatal. Malik walked beside me, a huge, terrifying presence, moving with tightly coiled power and phenomenal grace for such a big man. His shoulder-length dark hair was perfectly tousled, a hint of stubble on his hard jawline. After the fourth woman we passed shivered, and the fifth one crossed herself as we walked past, I turned and glared at him. “Can you dial it down a bit?”

He stared down at me. “Dial... *what* down?”

I waved a hand in his general direction. “That.”

He glanced down at his body, his brow furrowed. “I am unsure what you mean. I am wearing modern civilian clothes.”

I was, too. In my jeans and designer t-shirt, I was ready for anything. Malik had changed out of his black combat pants and shirt. He was wearing jeans and boots, like me, and a light gray Henley shirt. He still looked like wild passionate sex on a stick.

“I mean your essence. Can you try and hide it a bit better?”

He frowned. “I am. My nature is hidden deep within this human form. I am well practiced in concealing it. I have been doing it for centuries.”

I wisely resisted calling him a dirty liar and sighed wearily. “You know what? Never mind.” It wasn’t his essence that everyone was reacting to, anyway. It was just him. Even wrapped up tightly in a human form, Malik was like a blazing comet in the dark night sky; everyone stopped to look as he passed overhead.

He strode down the corridors on impossibly long legs, heading towards the neonatal ward. Harassed-looking women and agitated men in green scrubs raced back and forth down the hallways, disappearing through double-doors. New mothers with weary faces wheeled tiny babies in bassinets,

moving gingerly with their newly sliced up abdomens and freshly torn vaginas. I tried not to watch their thoughts.

It always blew my mind that we, as a society, collectively expected women to get up, move around, and take care of a tiny human immediately after major abdominal surgery, or even just with a mangled, bleeding vagina. It was quite barbaric, when you really think about it. My father had a bowel resection a few years ago, and he was in bed, moaning in pain for three whole weeks. He couldn't look after himself, let alone a helpless baby.

Imagine telling a gall-bladder removal patient that they had to sandpaper their nipples every four hours and never sleep again. Imagine insisting that someone take sole responsibility for a vulnerable newborn straight after having their appendix removed.

The things we demanded of women in our society were downright cruel. In a fair world, new mothers would be wrapped up in cotton wool and placed in bed for at least a month. Cuddling, feeding their babies, and healing should be their only job.

“Hey!” a voice called out.

I ignored it and continued walking towards the neonatal unit, but then cursed under my breath when footsteps picked up behind me. “Hey. You guys are looking for the new birthing class, right?”

I turned. A white woman with a pleasant, round face smiled back at me. I put her at around thirty years old, maybe a little less; her lightly freckled face was free of makeup and she had a breezy, confident demeanor. She wore a plain suit shirt, a pencil skirt, sensible shoes, and had a lanyard around her neck. In contrast to the business-casual outfit, she had a couple of visible tattoos, and her hair was a tangled mess of dark-blonde dreadlocks.

“Oh.” I smiled back. “Sure, we are.”

“You walked past the door,” she said helpfully. “It's just in here.”

I nodded. “Thank you.” I waited for her to walk away.

“Come on, then,” she said, laughing, “I know it’s the first class, and it’s new, but you don’t have to be nervous. I’m Hope,” she said, holding out her hand. “I’m teaching the class today.”

I took her hand and shook it. “I’m Anna,” I said, using my favorite fake name. “And this is my partner Cleetus.” I waved my hand towards Malik.

Hope turned to him, and looked up, and up, and up, her eyes widening. “Uh.... hello. It’s lovely to meet you... er... Cleetus.”

Malik made a dangerous noise, a low grunt. I elbowed him in the stomach. “Say hi to Hope, honey.”

He glowered down at her. “Good evening,” he finally said, his impatience almost palpable. The air around him shimmered with darkness.

I turned back to Hope and deliberately took a step in front of Malik, blocking her line of sight. “We’re so excited,” I told her, snapping her attention back to me. “I wanted to take the opportunity to check out the neonatal ward, maybe see some cute newborn babies.” I rubbed my hands together gleefully.

“Oh, we do a tour of the unit after the class. You’ll get to see the whole maternity ward,” Hope said, grinning at me. “So, you can see where you will be giving birth.”

I glanced up at Malik meaningfully. “Oh, that’s great!”

She checked her watch. “But the class is about to start, so come on.” She gathered me up and hustled me into the little room, keeping a respectable distance from Malik.

He glared at me pointedly as we walked through the door, but I deliberately ignored him. I wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth. If we got escorted through neonatal on a tour instead of having to sneak around and risk getting kicked out by security, it would be worth having to put up with whatever birthing class Hope was facilitating.



Inside, the room had been cleared of furniture, the tables and chairs stacked along one wall. A handful of people sat on yoga mats on the floor, arranged in a loose circle around a salt lamp, a singing bowl, and some big quartz crystals. The young couples talked quietly with their heads together. All of the women had obvious bumps.

My training kicked in automatically; I pushed out my abdomen slightly and relaxed my muscles, slumping a little so it looked like I had a tiny bump. It wasn't much, but it would do. I was lucky I was a little swollen anyway, and my loose jacket disguised the flatness of my tummy quite well.

Hope walked inside in front of us. She settled herself on a flat pillow at the front of the circle and clapped her hands. "Welcome, new parents!" She beamed around the circle. "Anna, Cleetus, come on in and take a seat on that yoga mat right here." She pointed to an empty spot to the left of her.

I nodded, walked forward, lowered myself down gingerly on the mat, and patted the space beside me. Not looking at Malik directly helped me concentrate better. He was right; he had his god-nature wrapped up so tightly I could barely feel it, so with my eyes off his face, I felt like I could think a little clearer. The petite Asian woman next to me audibly sighed as Malik gracefully folded himself down on the yoga mat next to me. Her white husband, a skinny man with adult acne, shot us a glare.

Hope waited until everyone had subconsciously adjusted to having a hidden god in their presence and smiled around the circle. "Welcome to your first class in Breathflow Birthing, *tee em*. This is the beginning of a new phase for all of you, as you embrace your role in becoming something bigger than an individual. You are becoming a soul pathway, a portal for new life. Breathflow Birthing—*tee em*—is a brand-new course in the divinity of childbirth, and I am honored and privileged to be imparting this wisdom to you." She closed her eyes and gave a little bow.

We all nodded politely. Hope clicked on a laptop beside her, and the projector threw up an image of a newborn baby

grinning in the birth canal. The words “Breathflow Birthing™” were written in bold underneath.

“Oh, I get it now,” the older man beside me muttered under his breath. “She’s saying ‘tee em’ because it’s trademarked.”

Hope smiled around the circle again, catching everyone’s eye as she spoke in reverent tones. “Breath is life,” she declared. “Breath is sacred, and we will be utilizing our breath and using it more during this blessed time. We will be leaning on it as a tool to ease the passage of the new life into this world. With Breathflow Birthing—*tee em*—you will learn to use your breath like a warrior, like a priestess, like an infinite spiritual being that you are, to help smooth the path and bring your new child into this earthly world.”

I smiled and nodded politely. This was a Lamaze class. Hope was reinventing the wheel, throwing a spiritualist spin on it, and making herself a little cash.

Idly, I wondered if she’d ever given birth herself. Hope’s thoughts didn’t swing towards her own children at all, which was rare for a mother, so I guessed she hadn’t. Her mind was only filled with plans for franchises, video courses, and online sales funnels.

After Hope’s opening address, we went around the circle, introducing ourselves. Everyone was a new parent apart from a portly bald man opposite me who had several children by his first wife, but his young nervous-looking partner—his third wife—had never had a baby before.

Hope nodded and gushed over everyone’s stories, particularly the sad bits. “Now,” she said, clapping her hands. “There are no course notebooks, no video units, no references, no homework. Breathflow Birthing—*tee em*—is purely physical and spiritual, just like the act of childbirth itself, so we will work in the physical and commit to the practice.” Hope hadn’t finished filming the video units yet. And she was arguing with her local print shop about the bindings on her notebooks.

Malik rumbled softly next to me. “We do not have time for this.”

Hope's eyes flickered over to us, her confidence wavered, then, she fixed her smile back onto her face. I elbowed Malik in the ribs and nodded at her to continue. The faster we got through this, the quicker we would be touring the neonatal unit.

Hope cleared her throat, regrouping. "We will now take the birthing positions. We shall practice moving into the flow state, where the birther will Breathflow, and their supporter will echo the movements." She stood up and turned the overhead lights off, leaving only the glow of three salt-lamps in the center of the circle, and fiddled with her phone for a second. Soft music filled the room—slow, throbbing bass and ambient sounds.

Immediately, the atmosphere thickened, becoming dreamy and relaxed. Hope directed us all to sit in traditional Lamaze poses, demonstrating with a nice young Swedish couple at the front, the mother sitting on the floor with bent knees, leaning back against her partner, with him cradling her gently. "Now, please all move into your positions, and we will start the Breathflow Birthing—*tee em*—practices."

The other new parents shuffled into position, knitting together with ease, but I froze, my pulse quickening. I didn't want to sit with Malik like this. I couldn't. It felt... too volatile. Too dangerous. I couldn't even look at him.

The room grew inexplicably darker, and warmer; almost too warm. My cheeks felt flushed. While I sat motionless and the others awkwardly settled themselves on their yoga mats, I sensed rather than felt him move. His hands slid around my waist, holding me firmly, and suddenly, I was nestled in between his long legs. Malik surrounded me on all sides—physically this time—and my mouth went dry.

"*Feel* into each other," Hope announced in a dreamy voice. "Feel that connection. Become two halves of a whole, symbiosis, that divine state of feminine and masculine bound together. And *breathe*."

Fuck. I'd been holding my breath. I took a shaky inhale and leaned back against him. An electric shock ran through

me, a pulse of pure excitement, my whole body tensed. I could feel his cool breath on my neck; his lips were so close. The smell of him; oh God, it was dangerous, explosive, like whisky and fireworks.

“Hmmm,” the pimply man next to me said, nuzzling into his wife’s cheek. “This is actually really nice. You were right, honey, this was a good idea.”

Across from us, the Swedish couple were breathing very deeply, eyes closed, running their hands over each other.

“Breathe into each other!” Hope moved her body gently in time with the music, shaking her head dreamily. “Find that connection and feel into it. *Feel* each other.”

I swallowed roughly. Malik’s hands were still on my hips. He inhaled again, deeper this time, and flexed his long fingers, pressing into my skin.

This was so different to being wrapped up in his shadow-form. It was so physical, so raw—the sensations were almost maddening. I could feel Malik’s broad, muscular chest expand behind me, cradling me, overwhelming me. His huge hands moved suddenly, grasping me, and he pulled me back, closer to his body. Closer. Oh, my God...

“Breathe into your lover,” Hope sang out, and I desperately searched for her, trying to find something mundane in this sea of overwhelming sensuality, something to latch onto so I wouldn’t drown in passion. Blinking, I tried to focus, but everything was fuzzy. Through the fog of desire, I spotted the Swedish couple kissing passionately on their yoga mat.

My eyes rolled back in my head a little. The light touch of Malik’s fingers resting gently on my hips, the cool breath washing over my neck, his lips so close to my skin... I closed my eyes, overwhelmed, and felt his long, dark hair brush over the bare skin at my throat. A deep throb pulsed between my legs, shocking me to the core. Malik dipped his head, running his lips over my skin, and inhaled deeply, breathing in my scent. He murmured in a foreign tongue, an endearment maybe, or a curse, perhaps, I felt the meaning behind the

strange language, and it seemed like it was both. *I must have you, woman, I need my head between your legs now before I kill everyone in this room.*

All sounds faded into the background—the moans of the man next to me, the deep pants of the woman on my other side, even Hope’s nonsensical breathy monologue faded away as I sank deeper into the blazing, savage sexuality of the man behind me. My head rolled back against his hard chest, I bared my neck, my core throbbing with such intensity I forgot everything. I wasn’t an ice-cold killer; I wasn’t a ditzy blonde. I was brutal, hard, unending passion. I was just a hole. *Yes. Yes, fill me. Please.*

A low rumble rose from deep in his chest, an overwhelmingly masculine sound, low with anticipation and hunger. Hunger. He wanted me. He could smell me; the blood between my legs called to him, and he wanted it.

I was on my period, and he was a vampire.

Mortification suddenly scorched through me, burning away the fog of passion, turning everything too bright, too sharp.

“Argh!” I scrambled to my feet, marched over to the door, and flicked on the overhead lights. The fluorescents made a *pink pink* sound as they blinked to life.

Sheepishly, the group sat up and rearranged their clothes. The Swedish man had removed his shirt; he scrambled to put it back on. The older guy next to me had his tongue thrust deep in his partner’s ear, and her hands were still rummaging around in his jeans.

I coughed deliberately. “Ah *hem*.”

Hope blinked. “Oh. I think we might have gotten carried away there.”

I took a deep breath, ignoring the heat in my cheeks. “Sorry, Hope, but I need to go. I have an... er...” I felt too rattled to make up an excuse, so I shrugged. “You know what, I’m just going to go.” Leaving the blushing parents-to-be

adjusting their clothes and wiping smeared lipstick from their cheeks, I turned around and walked out.

I didn't check to see if Malik followed me.

## CHAPTER 11



I strode down the hallway, breathing deeply, mentally ordering my legs to carry me forward without stumbling. A volatile presence behind me grew closer, like a sexy thunderstorm, and Malik moved up to hover darkly next to me.

“I am unsure as to why you would suddenly want to leave the birthing class,” he said, a hint of amusement in his deep voice. “It was just starting to get interesting.”

I swallowed roughly. His heat still scorched me. Tossing my hair back, I internally screamed at myself to get my shit together, imagined myself doused in icy-cold water, and turned to face him with the calmest expression I could muster. “It was taking too long,” I said airily. “I couldn’t be bothered waiting for Hope to take us on the tour. We might have been lying on that yoga mat breathing deeply for hours.”

A vision of me and Malik on the floor suddenly assaulted me, and a surge of excitement pulsed through my spine, almost knocking me off my feet. I bit the inside of my cheek to chase the feeling away.

“There are quicker ways to find your lost sibling,” I mumbled. *Get it together, Chloe!*

Up ahead, a door off the corridor opened. A man in scrubs walked out, wiped his tired face with his hands, and hurried off at almost a run.

I shook off the last of the heady fog and put my game-face on. That tired doctor must have been taking a nap on top of

some hospital blankets. “Here,” I said, jerking my head towards the door. “Laundry.” I checked to make sure the coast was clear, cracked the door open, and peeked inside. It was empty.

“Wait here,” I ordered, annoyed at how breathless my voice sounded. The last thing I needed was for the god of savage passion to follow me into a closet.

I ducked inside, rifled through the stacked bags of fabric, and found some green scrubs one size bigger than I’d usually wear. I pulled the scrubs over my jeans and t-shirt, and shoved my boots back on my feet, trying to ignore the squishy feeling of petroleum jelly that still lingered on my skin. Only a couple of hours had passed since I’d slathered myself in it in Ironclaw, but it almost felt like years.

God, I was tired. Ice-Cold Killer Chloe could stay awake for days, but Sweet Dumb Chloe needed at least eight hours every night. I could almost feel both sides of my personality hissing at each other as I shimmied out of the supply closet.

Malik stared at me as I walked out. “There’s nothing that will fit you,” I told him. The hospital didn’t supply scrubs for someone with god-like proportions. “We’re just going to have to bluff it out.” I put the lanyard over my neck, finishing my outfit.

Malik moved towards me; I tensed as he reached out and plucked the ID and access cards, inspecting them carefully. “Where did you get this?”

“From our High Priestess of Breathwork, *tee em.*” I had unclipped it one-handed from Hope’s neck as she shimmied around us, right before the fog of passion carried me away and turned my brain to mush.

Stealing someone’s security pass was almost a reflex for me. I was fully aware of the Mighty Power of the Lanyard—it was an all-access pass to most forbidden places. It didn’t really matter what was on it; as long as you had something official dangling around your neck and you walked with confidence and purpose, nobody ever stopped to question you. My male contemporaries always used high-vis vests and clipboards, but



that didn't work so well for women. In fact, it usually had the opposite effect. That's the patriarchy for you.

Malik examined the lanyard and frowned. "I did not see you steal it."

"Maybe you were too engrossed in the breathwork," I said shortly, not looking at him. I'd spent three months with a master pickpocket in Toulouse when I was eight years old. He taught me how to steal the contact lenses out of a mark's eye without them noticing.

We entered neonatal, moving quickly, ignoring everyone we passed with an air of superiority. With infiltration, it wasn't enough to pretend to belong; you had to become the person you were pretending to be. And right now, I was a pediatric cardiologist, escorting a new father to see his poor sick baby. To my chagrin, though, I barely had to bother with a cover. Anyone we encountered held their breath as soon as they spotted Malik striding down the corridor. Several nurses even stopped in their tracks to watch him as he walked by. There weren't many people around, anyway. It was getting late, lights were dimmed, and the only sound was soft murmurs, footsteps rushing back and forth, and tiny babies crying.

The maternity ward rooms were all full; I glanced inside surreptitiously as we walked past, my eyes brushing over thoughts quickly. A young husband and wife gazed down at their newborn, overwhelmed with both love and terror. An older woman sat in the dark and rocked her baby in her arms, already thinking about the extra laundry and expense of another mouth to feed. A gay couple held each other, their thoughts almost hysterical with happiness, and sobbed openly as they cradled their daughter while their surrogate watched them and beamed with pride. A very thin dark-haired girl scratched her arms compulsively and glared down at her baby screaming in the bassinet.

My eyes lingered on the last girl. She had already been discharged, but was too scared to go, knowing that she would just head straight to her dealer's house. She'd promised herself that she'd be a good mother to this one, she'd *promised*, but the itching had become too intense since her painkillers wore

off. She was suddenly desperate to abandon her baby and run, just like she had with the others. Her desperation and anguish flip-flopped so fast I couldn't keep up.

I wrenched my eyes away and kept walking. "Any idea where Pleonexy is?"

Malik gave one short shake of his head. "I cannot tell. This place is too close to the slipways; the energy is scattered. I feel his essence everywhere in this area; he could be in any one of these small human bodies." He pointed towards a room with several humidicribs in it; a lone nurse stood, reading a chart, too focused on her charges to notice us watching her. I ran my eyes quickly over the babies, seeing only fluttering images of shapeless things dancing in their auras.

"Hmm." I backed out of the room. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but instinct led me forward and down another corridor. In a little alcove waiting area, a man flicked through a boating magazine. I watched him for a second, noticing his thoughts weren't lingering on a sick baby like the rest of the people we'd passed. He was thinking of all the boats he wanted to own and was slightly bewildered at how sick he felt at not owning a yacht in the first place. The feeling burned in his belly; he wanted it so bad.

Up ahead at a small monitoring station, an older female nurse stared at a young, handsome security guard. Her thoughts were almost alarmingly greedy and spiteful. She imagined herself finding a way to have him, no matter what—maybe she could bribe him to take off her bra and fondle her, maybe she could blackmail him somehow...

The guard was thinking of his cousin's new car, a sleek Charger. It was shiny and loud in his thoughts. He'd already decided to steal it. He wanted it more than his cousin. He deserved it. He'd do anything to get it.

Without hesitation, I walked straight past them, through the monitoring station, over to a larger room that held a dozen humidicribs. Every baby was asleep; monitors beeped all around them.

"There." I pointed to a baby at the end. "That's him."

Malik glanced down at me. “You are sure?”

I nodded, looking away. One glance at the tiny creature in the humidicrib, and I knew. His thoughts looked like a black hole sucking at the psyche of humanity; all I could see was *I want, I want, I want...* He was so packed with the essence of greed, it made my chest hurt. “Oh, I’m sure.”

“Good.” Malik pulled at the hem of his Henley, lifting it up. The sight of his bare stomach almost knocked me unconscious—*I want... I want...*

He pulled a silver dagger out of a sheathe, and the greedy impulse disappeared instantly when I realized what he was about to do.

“No!” I hissed. “Malik, you can’t!”

His face was impassive. “I must. Pleonexy is on the edge of death, and if he goes now, he will cycle back into a mortal reincarnation.” His eyes met mine. “We are running out of time, woman. I must do this now.”

“I just... We can’t. It’s just a *baby*.” I shook my head. “You can’t stab a baby in the NICU, Malik. It just feels...” I squirmed. “Wrong isn’t the word. I need a word for the *most* wrong thing to ever be wrong. That’s what it is.”

“He is not a human baby.”

My eyes flickered back over to Pleonexy. “She,” I noted. The essence of greed had been reborn as a little girl.

“She is not mortal—she is a fractured god, and she must return to our realm. You *know* this.” Malik’s voice softened slightly, losing the hard edge. “As soon as I awaken her and plunge the dagger into her mortal shell, her body will dissolve, and will be no more. It will be as if she never existed in this new form.”

“Yeah, but...” I hesitated, and grimaced. “It’s not just Pleonexy, Malik. She was born into this world like a rock thrown into a pond; the ripples are going to keep going even if she disappears. She has parents, siblings, and grandparents. Her mom would have had a baby shower with her work colleagues, her dad probably enrolled her in some prestigious

preschool somewhere. There's a nursery waiting for her at home. If we kill her—"

"This does not concern me."

"It concerns me, though." Well, to be honest, it didn't concern me, but Sweet Dumb Chloe was inside me right now, tears pouring down her face, her face flushed, her nose red, begging me to spare Pleonexy's parents the heartache of losing their baby. They had no idea they'd given birth to the essence of greed. None of this was their fault, and their lives were about to be destroyed. They'd never know what happened to her. They wouldn't know why she disappeared.

Sweet Dumb Chloe was forcing me to expand my heart, and God, it hurt. It was one thing to kill a bad guy, but it was another to think about the hole it left in someone's heart.

Malik glowered down at me, his hand still on his knife. There were lots of things he could have said in this moment. He knew about my history. The fact that he didn't call me a hypocrite made my heart ache even more. "I must do this," he said softly. "The fate of all the worlds is at stake, woman, do you not understand?"

"Of course I understand." I turned away and swore under my breath. There must be something I could do. Something to stop the inevitable heartache.

An idea floated into my head. "Malik. Can you give me five minutes?"

He clenched his jaw, staring at me for a long moment. "Fine," he said roughly. "But if Pleonexy's mortal shell crumbles and she leaves this world before I can Awaken her, the Lightbringers—"

I waved my hand, cutting him off. "Yes, yes, I promise I'll have a good talk with them and tell them I'm responsible for the destruction of all humanity." I met his gaze, pleading. "Please, Malik."

He let out a rough sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Five minutes."

I whirled around, ran back to the maternity ward, and found the room quickly. The skinny dark-haired woman was still scratching her arms, glaring into the bassinet. I walked inside, shut the door, and looked; the crying baby was a girl, just like Pleonexy, very small, with a scattering of dark hair. The woman's glare cut towards me. Suspicion and fear bloomed in her thoughts.

"Just go," I said quietly. "Leave her here and go. Nobody will come after you. She'll be looked after—I promise you that."

The woman's aura whirled; visions of anguish and heartbreak surged through her mind, along with a touch of something else. Something sweet; a lightness, like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

It was pure, blessed relief. She didn't want her baby to go through the things she went through. But she had no idea how to stop those things happening, because she could never stop them happening to her. Her lips trembled. "Are you sure? She'll be okay?"

I nodded. "Yes. And you will be one day, too. One day, you'll get the strength to get clean, and you'll realize that none of the things that happened to you were your fault."

She started to cry.

Tears welled up in my eyes, too. "Go," I said, patting her arm gently. "Go east. Head to D.C. as soon as you can, okay? There's a new rapid detox clinic at Charmedical—it's experimental, so they're taking volunteers, and there's a post-detox program with a halfway house they can put you through. Get out of Long Beach, go there. This is your chance. You can't run from the pain, you know that, right? But you can go somewhere and learn to live with it better."

"Okay." She nodded, and wiped her eyes, and looked at me for a long moment. "Are... are you...?" The image in her thoughts was me with a glowing white aura and a halo above my head.

“God, no.” I shook my head. “I’m no angel. But I know about pain. It gets better. I promise.”

The woman took a deep breath, picked up a large bag and slung it over her shoulders, and stalked out of the room without looking back.

I waited a moment, then took the crying baby in my arms. She settled almost immediately, and I power-walked out of the room. Within thirty seconds I was back in the intensive care unit, walking with purpose, my head held high like I belonged, but it didn’t matter what I did. Nobody was paying any attention to me. The nurse at the monitoring station was battling the impulse to reach out and fondle the handsome security guard. The guard was on his phone, sourcing a gun and a ski mask so he could carjack his cousin. He deserved that car, he wanted it, so it was going to be his...

Babies cried weakly all around us, ignored, as the essence of greed spilled out into the room, suffocating us. It was like walking through putrid molasses, every step I took, I had to remind myself that they weren’t my feelings, they were coming from someone else.

Malik stood over Pleonexy’s bassinet, his hard dark eyes melting with relief when he saw me. I nodded, and he bent down and kissed the baby on her tiny lips.

“Sister,” he whispered. “Wake up.”

The baby’s lids blinked open, and bright-white light blazed from her eyes.

Malik smiled and brought the dagger down.

## CHAPTER 12



We walked out of the hospital slowly. My feet squelched a little in my shoes; idly, I wondered how long they'd been making that noise. I could have been walking around the hospital making fart sounds all night, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

Malik walked beside me, not saying a word. Some of the tension had drained from his body—the hard lines of his shoulders had relaxed a little, and the stiffness in his ridiculously handsome jaw had eased. It could have been because we'd just sent one of his siblings home. Or it could have been because I sounded like a walking whoopie cushion. Whatever the reason, Malik's thundercloud aura had calmed down just a little.

We left the bright lights of the hospital entrance and cut down a dark alleyway. The tension between us thickened again when I remembered what it was like to lie back against his massive chest with his hands resting on my hips. It was an effort to stop thinking about it.

Once we were suitably hidden from prying eyes, he turned to me and held out his hands. "May I?"

I inhaled sharply, then tried to cover it up when I realized what he was asking. We had to get home, and he was asking permission to take me. I swallowed and shoved down the warm glow that surged in the pit of my belly. "Sure."

He morphed into shadow, covering me completely. This time when he carried me through the air, he held me gently,

my arms and legs looser by my sides. He carried me as if I was a delicate object, something that might break if he squeezed it too hard.

I savored it. I did feel delicate. It had been a very long day, and I'd felt too many feelings.

Even cocooned gently in Malik's shadow beast form, I felt the change when he dropped abruptly from the sky, sharply turning and heading back down to earth. He placed me down on the ground and uncurled himself from around me.

It was too dark; I couldn't see much of anything, but I knew we weren't in Castlemaine. No artificial lights were on anywhere around us, overhead, stars spilled across the endless dark sky like diamonds on black velvet. I spun slowly in a circle. The craggy dry ridges of the Badlands stretched in front of us, so we weren't far away from home. "What's going on?"

Malik faced away from me, staring at a misshapen lump on the ground. I blinked, willing my eyes to adjust to the dim light quicker, and saw the tension return to the hard line of his massive shoulders.

"A complication."

The lump was half of a person.

I pulled out my phone, switched on the flashlight, and moved closer, registering the smell of earth and ashes. The dead person was a man—a vampire, in fact—his body crumbling away slowly into nothingness. His arms and legs had already flaked away, but his torso and face were still mostly intact. Naked, with strange incisions all over his body, the vampire looked like he'd been tortured in the same way as Kaia the dryad and Sammy the brownie.

I examined the body, careful not to touch it as it flaked away to nothingness. He must have been fairly new. Old vampires turned to dust almost immediately when they went to their final death. The more recently turned ones took a little longer to dissolve. I ran my flashlight over the body, checking him carefully for clues.



The vampire had messy bronze hair with a telltale sheen that indicated it was dyed that color, which was an odd choice. His eyes, too, were a strange shade of gold behind his half-closed lids. I moved closer and saw that they were contacts; underneath, his eyes were plain brown. That was also weird.

His mouth was open in a terrifying rictus, a scream frozen in time. Several of his teeth had been removed. Only one fang remained.

“He must have been dumped here very recently,” I murmured in the silence.

“Within the hour, I would say.”

“He has the same wounds and amputations as Kaia. Sammy the brownie’s injuries were similar, but he’d probably been in the water for a long time, and I didn’t check his body closely.” I wasn’t even sure what had happened to it. A rush of shame ran through me—at the time, I just figured dead bodies in the lake might be one of Castlemaine’s strange little quirks.

I should have done more. Maybe this vamp wouldn’t have died if we got the word out earlier. Maybe the Castlemaine Killer would have stopped their murder spree once we put a little heat on them.

There was no better time to right wrongs than right now. I carefully inspected the vamp’s body for identifying features and found a tattoo on his upper arm—the logo of a baseball team. He was definitely a new vampire. “Do you know who could have done this?”

Malik brooded in silence for a moment. “Nobody in Castlemaine would do this.”

I frowned. “I was under the impression that *anyone* in the town could have done this. Castlemaine seems to be made up of morally gray creatures, Malik.”

“We do not prey on our own. Once the town accepts you as a resident, you are safe. Castlemaine only preys on outsiders who seek to do harm. The innocents who get lost in the slipways are mostly left alone, and we actively encourage them to return the way they came.”

“The Countess Greenwood gave me a different impression.”

“The Sorceress’s bark is worse than her bite. She will only attack if she has been provoked.”

I remembered what I’d learned in Ironclaw about how the pack often hunted people who wandered into their territory. “Braxton Myles preys on people who fall through the slipways. His pack hunts lost explorers.”

That poor Scottish guy was probably being chased by vicious werewolves right now. I made a mental note to make sure he stayed on our side of the mountain. Or, even better, I’d find him when I had a chance and haul him back through the slipway. It had probably moved now, though. I’d have to put him on a plane back home instead.

“I cannot do much about Braxton Myles.” Malik let out a rough sigh. “You are already aware I have agreed not to enter Ironclaw. Castlemaine is under my protection; I cannot be everywhere at once.”

I nudged the crumbling body with my toe. “If this guy is from Castlemaine, then I think you might have a problem. Someone in town has gone rogue and is slicing up the residents.” I peered up at him, trying not to get overwhelmed by the beauty of his profile outlined against the starry night sky. “You’re not going to blame Sarah for this?”

He shook his head. “The poltergeist has injured several people during her rampages in the past. It was safe to assume that the body you found in the lake might be her doing, and probably an accident. But it is unlikely she would be responsible for two, let alone three dead bodies in the past few days.”

I gnawed on my lip for a second. “The brownie in the lake was a resident. Kaia was, too. If this vamp is from Castlemaine, I think it’s safe to say you’ve got a serial killer in your town, Malik.”

He glared down at the body. “I do not have time for this,” he muttered. “Finding my siblings must take priority. I cannot

even take this one back to Castlemaine; he will crumble into dust as soon as we touch him.”

His thoughts betrayed his words—Malik was furious that someone was preying on the residents of Castlemaine. He wanted to find the killer and tear them to pieces. But the weight of his burden hung so heavy on his shoulders. He was running out of time to find his siblings. If he failed, then billions of innocent humans would die at the hands of the Lightbringers.

His torment swirled within him, and I watched, fascinated. Figures of light with strange names blazed through his thoughts—the remainder of his missing siblings. One in particular had just been reborn; he could sense them somewhere in North Africa, and he was frantic to go looking for them. They should be easy to find that far away from the slipways, and he wouldn’t need me to sense their exact location. Malik was torn between his sacred duty, and the safety of the little magical town he had inadvertently created.

Without thinking, I put my hand on his shoulder; a pulse rushed through me at the touch. “Let me handle this. I’ll find out who this vamp is and see if I can make some sort of connection with him and the other victims. I’ll do my best to find the Castlemaine Killer.”

He turned to face me and studied my face for a long moment. I locked my knees so my legs wouldn’t shake.

Finally, Malik nodded. “Thank you.” His molten-lava eyes met mine, and for the millionth time, I thanked my lucky stars that he couldn’t see my thoughts like I could see his.

I cleared my throat awkwardly, trying to dispel some of the tension. “We can’t take him with us, so I’ll get some photos.” I pulled out my phone, made sure the flash was on, and took several pictures of his face, while avoiding his mutilated, crumbling body. “The two vampires who live down from me might know who he is.”

## CHAPTER 13



Malik took me straight home. I avoided looking at him as I said goodbye; I'd reached my quota of how much of his blazing sensuality I could take. Nervous energy filled me as soon as he left me, however, and I knew I wasn't going to be able to sleep anytime soon. Instead of going straight inside, I walked a few doors down to Jerry and Terry's place.

The two vamps had given their cottage a gothic makeover; the exterior looked almost like a miniature version of Malik's castle on the mountain. I crunched up the glittering quartz footpath and knocked on the door. A portly bald man opened it.

"Hello!" He grinned at me, showing a hint of sharp fang. "I'm Terry." He held out his hand for a shake. "We haven't officially met yet. You must be Chloe."

A shorter man with a salt-and-pepper goatee appeared behind him and waved happily. "Howdy, neighbor!"

"Er. Hi. Hey, you guys. It's, uh, nice to finally meet you." I couldn't stop looking at their outfits. They were wearing matching purple velour tracksuits. They both looked like berries with fangs.

Terry's grin turned sheepish. "I know, I know. We're not what you expected. It's one of the reasons we moved to Castlemaine, you know. We don't really suit the vampire aesthetic."

Jerry moved up behind his mate and put his hands around his waist. “Our nest in Baltimore actually kicked us out,” he announced, still grinning. “Because Terry here refused to give up wearing sweater vests.”

Terry slapped his shoulder playfully. “And you wouldn’t give up your membership to the Taylor Swift fan club.”

“It’s nice to meet you guys. I wish I came with better news,” I said, pulling out my phone. “I need your help in identifying someone. Malik Malleus and I were just coming back from Long Beach, and we found this guy’s body in the Badlands.”

The vamps peered at the screen. Jerry frowned and pulled a pair of glasses on a chain out from underneath his vest, put them on, then looked again. “Oh,” he sighed. “Yeah, we know him. That’s Dante.”

“Dante?”

“Yeah. He lives by himself on Elm Avenue, higher up the mountain. He’s only been in town six months or so. He’s a bit odd.”

I looked at him pointedly.

“No, not odd like us. A different kind of odd. He tells everyone he was turned against his will,” he said, rolling his eyes. “But I heard from Janet back in Baltimore that he paid another vamp in Idaho to turn him. Dante came here to Castlemaine crying to anyone who would listen about his new vampiric nature. It’s such a cliché.” Jerry counted off his points with his fingers. “Hates feeding off humans because he loves them so much. Covers himself in glitter and pretends it’s his natural skin tone. Lurks outside the local high school, trying to pick up young human women so he can love-bomb them and act all tortured and broody.” He winked. “You know the kind.”

“Yeah.” That would explain the messy bronze hair and the gold contacts. “I get it.” I tapped the phone. “He’s dead now, though. Any ideas on who might have killed him? I don’t have

much to go on since most of his body had crumbled away, but it showed signs of medical dissection.”

They shook their heads in tandem. “He was a loner. Apart from occasionally trying to act out his teenage fantasies, he kept to himself.”

Jerry rubbed his goatee. “He hunted outside the town, if that helps. Those cuts could be just scratches. Maybe a mountain lion got the better of him.”

I knew it wasn’t. Not unless the mountain lion had a weird form of OCD and made sure his claws always cut in precise straight lines.

A wave of exhaustion rushed through me, and I decided to wrap things up, go home, and get some sleep. As I said my goodbyes to my odd vampire neighbors, before I knew it, I’d agreed to come to game night next Wednesday. Jerry and Terry were desperate for someone to join their tabletop campaign.

## CHAPTER 14



I woke to the sound of the most beautiful music. A woman sang, clear as a bell, her voice sweet and pure. I pinched my eyes shut again, still on the edge of sleep, savoring the angelic tones in case it was a dream which would disappear at any second. For a long moment, I wallowed in floaty bliss, listening to a celestial song float through my window.

I had to get up, though. Consciousness pricked at me, and I finally opened my eyes. The singing continued and a surge of pure pleasure rushed through me. It was so beautiful, I felt like I had to go and see what it was. I hauled myself upright and wiped my hands over my face.

The beautiful song even dulled the irritation I felt at having fallen asleep in my clothes. It was probably a good thing; I was still covered in petroleum jelly. At least my clothes would have stopped the worst of it transferring onto my sheets. I barely paid attention to myself, though, all I could think about was the beautiful singing pouring through my windows from outside. I stumbled into the living room, then out the French doors through the kitchen.

Dawn had broken—I was going to be late for work, but I couldn't bring myself to care. Not when golden light was streaming over the lake, creating a heavenly scene in front of me, and certainly not when the angelic sound of the exquisite melody caressed my ears. Despite everything—my uncomfortable jelly-soaked clothes, my swollen uterus, my

sore feet—my whole body felt cozy and weightless. I floated down easily to the edge of the water.

There was a woman there, standing waist-deep at the edge of the lake—voluptuous and sensual with long bright-copper hair flowing over one shoulder and a green bikini. Her mouth was luscious, full-lipped, and painted perfectly coral pink. The most divine song poured out of it. I felt like I was looking at her through stars in my eyes.

I needed to get closer. I tiptoed over the grass, hoping not to disturb her song, then squelched over the muddy bank.

As soon as my feet touched the water, however, a prickle of unease ran through me, and I glanced up. The woman in the lake had massive boobs. No bikini top in the world could possibly hold those things up.

I hesitated; the woman smiled. “Come closer, my angel,” she cooed. “Come to me.” Her voice thrilled through me.

Huh.

I stared at her for a long moment, separating my thoughts from my feelings and checking on my impulses, cataloging what her singing was doing to my body. When I was a child, undergoing some horrific training, one of the things my handlers had worked on intensively was making sure I could function when I was drugged. I’d spent a lot of time setting off bombs and severing arteries while I was high as a kite. It was useful then, and it was useful now. The woman’s siren song was magical, and she was compelling me to enter the water. Once I realized what was happening, it was easy to resist.

I forced my feet to stop walking further into the water, and they complied with my order when I was only ankle deep in the lake. They refused to retreat, though. This bitch was strong.

I looked at the woman and cocked my head. “Is your bikini top magical too?”

Her beautiful song faltered and stopped. She furrowed her brow. “Huh?”



“It would have to be magical.” I winked. “No amount of fabric in the world could hold up those huge melons without some serious spellwork.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Bitch.”

The water exploded. A huge sea-green tentacle shot out, wrapping around my legs, and pulled me off my feet before I could even blink. Another fat tentacle circled my waist, dragging me forward towards her. I struggled vigorously and managed to pull one of my arms out of her hold, hiding it behind my back as the monster pulled me in.

Slowly, she parted her lips, smiling evilly. Pointed shark’s teeth filled her mouth, her lips a pretty coral pink in sharp contrast to her horrifying gaping maw. She pulled me closer.

I punched her in the mouth.

“Ow!” she shrieked, and dropped me, cupping her face with her hands. “What the hell?”

The tentacles unwound, dropping me in the water. I sank under the surface for a second, kicking away instantly, but another meaty limb found my leg and yanked me back up by the ankle. I hovered upside down, dripping.

“That was mean,” the woman pouted.

“So is this.” I pointed my toe, my leg slipped from her hold, and I dove into the water again. This time, instead of swimming away, I kicked off the bottom of the lake and shot towards her.

I needed to know what I was fighting. The lake was a little murky, but I could see clearly enough. Under the surface I could make out the woman’s body. Sprouting straight from her human-looking, enviably slim waist were eight huge green tentacles the size of boa constrictors. They sprawled along the lake’s edge, thick and monstrous.

I shot up behind her, ignoring the tentacles, and punched her in the stomach.

“Oof!” Her tentacles spasmed, and she doubled over in the water, heaving in air for a moment. “You fucking *bitch!* I’m

going to tear off your goddamn head!”

I quickly swam several feet away and popped out of the water, just as she thrust two more tentacles at me, snarling with rage.

“Uh uh!” I whipped my Ruger out from my holster and pointed it at her. She froze. “I assure you, this thing works just fine in water.”

She eyed me beadily for a second. Her thoughts told me she would survive a bullet fairly easily, but she didn’t want to ruin her new bikini top. It was, as I suspected, layered in anti-gravity spells. The witch who made it for her charged a fortune. “You were asleep just a moment ago,” she accused.

“I was.”

“You sleep with your guns?”

Who didn’t sleep with their guns? Oh yeah. Everyone who was *not* an assassin, probably. “I sure do.”

“What are you, some kind of monster?”

A slightly hysterical chuckle escaped my lips. “You’re Norma, I presume.”

She arched her brow and inclined her head. “And you’re Chloe, Dwayne’s pet.” She sniffed delicately. “This wasn’t a fair fight. For some unfathomable reason, you’re covered in lubricant. I can’t grab hold of you properly.”

“It wasn’t a fair fight to start with. I’m a human, I have no magic, and you were luring me to my death with your siren song.”

“I wasn’t putting much effort in. Besides, I wasn’t going to kill you.”

“I find that hard to believe.” I’d already been warned several times about Norma.

“I wasn’t.” She pouted. “You’ve been here too long anyway; I probably wouldn’t get away with eating you.”

“You eat residents all the time.”

“No, I don’t. Of course I don’t.”

I eyed her carefully. “What about that brownie I found dead here yesterday morning?”

“Ew.” She curled her lip. “He wasn’t mine. He washed in from the Rocky River overnight.” She gave a delicate shudder, jiggling her enormous boobs. “Brownies are disgusting; I didn’t want to eat him. I was actually trying to decide what to do with him when you showed up and asked Dwayne to fish him out. Thanks for that, by the way,” she added. “I didn’t want to get in trouble with the Laird.”

“You mean Malik Malleus?”

“Yeah.” She shrugged. “He’s the Laird of Castlemaine.”

I took a moment to process what she was telling me. So, the brownie wasn’t dumped in the lake; he’d washed in from outside of town. Just like Kaia, who was found just on the outskirts of town, and the vampire, whose body was dumped in the Badlands. All three were Castlemaine residents, all three had the same kind of wounds, and all three were found on the edge of town.

A brownie, a dryad, and a vampire get murdered by a serial killer in a supernatural town... It sounded like the start of a bad joke. “Something is abducting and killing the residents of Castlemaine,” I said, pointing at Norma. “It’s not you?”

“Of course not. I don’t eat locals.”

“But you were going to eat me.”

“No. I just wanted to beat you up a little, hold you hostage, maybe.”

I frowned. “Hold me hostage?”

Her mouth twisted. “Your little bastard owner is flying around the town right now, showing off. He’s been avoiding me, and I deserve a rematch.”

“Oh.” Understanding dawned. “You and Dwayne have been fighting?”

“This is *my* domain,” she hissed. “I’m the Queen of Castlemaine Lake. That feathery asshole can’t just strut into town and take my lake from me.” Her teeth snapped.

“Oh. Oh, *that’s* what he was talking about.” A huff of laughter bubbled out of me. “You were the sexy redhead he was punching in the face yesterday.”

The annoyed expression fell off her face; she blinked at me, astonished. “He thinks I’m sexy?”

I chuckled, realizing why I didn’t recognize her from Dwayne’s thoughts. He had been far more complimentary about her appearance. In Dwayne’s mind, Norma was a bombshell.

Norma was certainly going for the pin-up vibe, but you couldn’t really excuse the fact that from the waist down, she was a pure horror story. I nodded towards one of her tentacles, idly swirling towards me. “You’re a cecaelia?”

She nodded sulkily.

“I didn’t think you could live in freshwater. I thought your kind could only live in saltwater.”

“I don’t need salt. I’m magical, stupid.” She stuck her nose in the air. “I’ve been here for generations. You can tell that web-footed asshole that.”

“So, just to confirm...” I edged backwards, still holding the gun on her. “You didn’t know the brownie who washed up yesterday?”

She shrugged, her voluptuous shoulders rising up out of the water. “I’ve seen him around. I don’t know him, though.”

“Did you know a dryad called Kaia?”

“Ha. Of course I did. She got around, if you know what I mean.”

“No. What do you mean?”

“That wooden floozy couldn’t keep her legs shut,” Norma sniffed superciliously. “Everyone knew her.”

“Right.” That confirmed what Nancy told me. According to lore, lots of dryads were promiscuous. I didn’t judge. Our lives were short and filled with pain. People should be able to indulge in whatever pleasure they could get. “What about a vampire called Dante?”

She bit her lip for a moment, thinking. “That rings a bell. Oh! Was it that little shit who kept leaving microplastics in my water?”

“Micropl— oh. The glitter. Yeah, that’s him.”

She pursed her lips. “Yeah, I knew him. I managed to shout at him one day when the high school was doing a sailing class out here. He was lurking on the edge of the water, staring intensely at the girl’s class.” She pursed her lips. “That glitter isn’t biodegradable, you know. And he should stay away from teenage girls. He’s fucking creepy.”

I nodded. “Yes, he is. He’s dead now, though.”

She pursed her lips, thinking for a moment. “Good,” she finally said. “Honestly, vampire men who hang around young girls like that deserve to get cut into little pieces. It’s not romantic, it’s just fucking gross.”

“I’m not going to argue with you there.” I took a deep breath and sighed. “But now it’s pretty clear that there’s a serial killer in this town, preying on the residents.”

“Huh.” She chewed on her luscious coral lips for a second. “I can see how you would find that concerning. It must be someone strong, since they got the better of a vamp and a dryad. Even the brownies are a lot stronger than they look. And you’re just a little twig of a human,” she added, sneering at me. “You’ll get snapped in two.”

“Now I know why you can live in freshwater,” I said, slowly backing up towards my cottage, still keeping my Ruger pointed at her chest. “You’re salty enough.”

“Bitch,” she snorted, splashing her tentacles at the edge of the water. “Tell that feathery bastard friend of yours to come and face me!”

## CHAPTER 15



I stomped back inside, unreasonably annoyed by the fact that the day was starting out worse than yesterday.

A giant black hound with blazing red eyes loomed in my kitchen. I refocused, and he morphed into a stocky young man, standing in front of my refrigerator. The expression on his hairy face was pure guilt.

I pointed at him. “You better not be using all my milk again, Jeb.”

“He did,” a little girl’s voice drifted over from the sofa. “But I got you some more.” I glanced over towards the sound, but nobody was sitting there.

I didn’t want to know where a poltergeist got milk from. “Are you okay, Sarah?” I called out.

The floorboards beneath me rumbled slightly in response. Oh, shit. Sarah was upset.

“It was Daphne,” Jeb explained in his gruff voice. “They talked a little last night. Some of the things that Daphne had been through were quite triggering for Sarah, so she’s lying low. She doesn’t want to lose control of herself while she’s in your house, because she promised she wouldn’t break anything, and she doesn’t want to leave, because of the T.V.”

I nodded, understanding. I had no idea what Sarah had been through; she hadn’t told me anything yet, but I assumed, since she was now a violent poltergeist, that her origin story wasn’t pleasant. I glanced at the sofa again. “So... Where is Daphne?”

“In the closet,” Sarah’s voice vibrated through the air towards me. “She doesn’t feel comfortable sleeping anywhere else.”

Poor Daphne. I’d liberated her from Ironclaw, dragged her over the mountain to Castlemaine, and left her in the care of a poltergeist, a hellhound, and a psychotic murder goose, while I ran off to help the Vampire Lord find a little baby so he could stab her in the heart with a silver dagger.

I took a deep breath and sighed it out roughly. When did my life get so... insane? Oh, right. When I was born.

I still had to go to work. Bills didn’t pay themselves, and I couldn’t rely on Sarah to keep stealing milk for me. And I still had to solve the mystery of whoever was snatching up the residents of Castlemaine and leaving their cut-up bodies at the edge of town.

I also needed to come up with a snappier name for that mystery. Castlemaine Kidnap-And-Cut Killer? Cunning Castlemaine Corpse Carving Cunthead?

Hmm. That one was probably too much.

Why the hell did I promise Malik I’d take care of it? I had enough on my plate right now. I pointed at Jeb. “Coffee, please,” I begged him. Guiltily, he opened the fridge and handed me the mostly empty milk carton.

Today, I planned to take Daphne to work and introduce her to Nathaniel. I wasn’t sure what we were going to do from there—no doubt Braxton Myles was still gunning for me, and he would definitely want Daphne back. We had time to figure it out, though. Now that he knew I was under Malik Malleus’s protection, he’d be reluctant to charge into Castlemaine and take us back.

Except Nathaniel was even more powerless than me. He couldn’t shift, and his muscles were just for show. He wouldn’t be able to protect Daphne, but he did know more people in town than I did. There was a chance he knew a powerful witch who could ward against certain people instead

of species, so he could keep Braxton Myles and his disgusting betas out of the Flex Factory.

I took a deep breath through my nose and winced. “I need a shower,” I muttered. I smelled like duck poop. Stomping down the hallway, I grabbed a towel out of my linen closet and headed into the bathroom. After lathering myself up in soap and rinsing five times, I finally got the last of the petroleum jelly off my body. I stayed under the warm spray until some of the tension eased, turned it off reluctantly, and stepped out of the shower.

Towelng off roughly, I slapped on a little moisturizer and sunscreen, dried my hair, and pulled it up into a high ponytail. I retreated to my bedroom and got dressed quietly, finally opening my closet to find Daphne still curled up on the floor inside.

“Daphne, honey,” I whispered. “Wake up.”

She flinched, still half-asleep. I recognized the images that whirled through her thoughts as she emerged into consciousness—first, panic and fear, then, passionate relief as she realized she was out of Ironclaw and safe in the closet of a bizarre blonde woman. I smiled down at her, seeing that I was much prettier in her thoughts. She liked me a lot. Finally, her enormous eyes blinked open. She stared up at me, and apprehension bloomed in her aura again.

“It’s okay,” I told her. “I’m taking you to see your uncle today.”

Her little brow furrowed. “But—”

“No.” I cut her off before she could talk. “Nathaniel’s not a useless moron,” I told her. “He can’t shift, but he knows a lot about the town, and he has lots of friends. He’s a wonderful, sweet person. You’ll love him. You’ll be as safe with him as you are with me.”

She got to her feet apprehensively. “Can the ghost girl come with me, just in case?”

“I’ll ask her if she can. She might not be able to,” I warned her. “She can’t go everywhere in town, but I’m sure she can



watch over you.”

Daphne stared up at me. “Okay.” She trusted me a lot. I wondered if I deserved it.

I waited for her to use the bathroom, brush her teeth, and get changed into one of my smallest shirts, then we left the cottage.

Dwayne swooped down as we were leaving, back from his morning flight. He had nothing to report apart from the fact that the tall Scottish explorer was still roaming over the mountain, staying firmly in Castlemaine for now. There were no more dead bodies lying around, which was a relief.

I told Dwayne about what happened with Norma earlier, and he honked happily and strutted off towards the lake for a rematch, ignoring my pleas to leave her alone. I sighed, took Daphne by the hand, and started the short walk around Lakeside Drive, heading towards the gym.

Daphne clutched my hand. I glanced down at her. “What’s on your mind, kid?”

It was a moment before she spoke. “What if he doesn’t like me?”

“He already likes you. Your Uncle Nathaniel has met you once before, you know. Back when you were a baby and still living at the church.” I smiled down at her. “He wanted you and your momma to come down here and live so badly that he bought you a house, you know.”

“He did?”

“Yeah.” I neglected to mention it was my house now. I’m no saint. Especially now that I’d met Molly and found out what a giant feral bitch she was, there was no way I was going to give up my picture-perfect, fairytale cottage for her.

“Well... why didn’t we? Why didn’t we come and live here? Why did Momma want to stay with the Church, and then at Ironclaw?”

I squirmed a little. “It’s complicated. Your momma has been hurt, you know. Ironclaw isn’t a nice place to live, but

sometimes, when you're used to being treated in a certain way, it's familiar. And what is familiar feels safe. You know what I mean?"

She nodded furiously. "I thought about that a little last night. Running away from Ironclaw was really brave, and I can't believe we did it. I saw you at the Church, you know. Twice," she said, squeezing my hand. "Just after Father Baron died, you came in. You were pretending to be a lost girl, and Father Thomas was showing you around."

"You saw me?"

"Uh huh. I followed you guys around." She hesitated for a second. "I was looking through the window when you killed Father Thomas."

My mouth dropped open. "You saw that?"

"Yeah." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "It was awesome."

I was silent for a long time. So that's why she'd been so trusting. That's why she chose to escape Ironclaw with me. None of the others realized what I was capable of, but she had always known. "I'm sorry you had to see it, Daphne."

"I'm not. It was cool. I almost cheered out loud when you choked Father Thomas." Her eyes dropped to the ground. "He was a bad man."

"He was, yes." All sorts of lies hung on the edge of my tongue; *I didn't want to kill him, I didn't enjoy it, he didn't deserve to die, we shouldn't celebrate death, every life is precious...*

A strange noise tore through the silence of the morning, smothering her response—a strangled yelp, and several zap sounds, an electric sound similar to a malfunctioning transformer.

"What was that?" Daphne's huge eyes were round and frightened.

Another zap cut through the air, then a roar of an engine drowned everything else out. I pulled Daphne by the hand,

pushing her behind me, and ducked down a little alleyway towards the sound to see what was happening.

A cloud floated in the middle of the tiny avenue. Pitch black and the size of a tank, the cloud hovered just above the pavement. Now, there's something you don't see every day.

The air in front of it shimmered with magic; invisible creatures were fighting right in front of the cloud. I focused. Within the shimmering air, I could make out faint visions, the thoughts of the two combatants, but I couldn't make sense of them. One was cold, predatory, only focused on the task at hand, trying to secure a thin woman's arms with strange gleaming metallic cuffs. The other mind was outraged and visualizing ways to fight back, determined to shake off what looked like an electrified net.

Smacks and shrieks echoed around the little street. I pushed Daphne behind a bush. "Stay there," I ordered. I pulled out my Glock and ran towards the black thundercloud floating in the street.

"Hey!" I shouted, pulling the focus towards me.

The two fighting figures in the street jolted. The outraged one, still thinking about an electric net, saw me, and I watched their thoughts morph into a vision of myself, coming to the rescue. The predatory one's thoughts did the same, but instead of a brave rescuer, the vision was of an idiot blonde girl stumbling down the street holding a plastic toy. Not very complimentary.

I lifted my chin and swung the Glock towards the predatory one. "Don't move."

Whoever it was didn't obey me; the aura slid sideways, heading towards the cloud. Just then, the dark cloud made an odd *vroom* sound.

It was a car. A car, spelled to look like a cloud. Someone was working some intense black magic to disguise both the attacker and the getaway car.

I swung my aim towards the cloud and fired, just as the cloud roared down the street, squealing around the corner, and

out of sight.

“Well, don’t just stand there,” a haughty voice said. “Come and help me, new girl.”

The air shimmered, flickered and flashed, then, the Countess Ebadoratheia Greenwood was lying in the middle of the street, dressed head-to-toe in her usual designer workout gear—three-quarter yoga pants and a floaty gym top. Her heavily tattooed arms and legs were tangled up in what looked like a sparkly fishing net.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” I said politely.

“Well, it was,” she sniffed. “Until about five minutes ago.”

I bent down to examine the net. “Is it spelled?”

Countess Greenwood pursed her lips. “Yes. It is a dulling net. It’s suppressing my natural defenses.”

“Will it hurt me if I touch it?”

“It shouldn’t, new girl. You have no powers.”

I did, but she didn’t need to know that. And since I didn’t need to be able to see thoughts right now, I got to work. The thread of the net was fine and tangled so tightly I wasn’t sure if I was going to be able to set her free.

A little hand nudged me. “Here.” Daphne held out a KaBar knife.

I stared at her. “Where did you get that?”

“From your room.”

That was obvious; I recognized it from my kit. I preferred to carry Stubby McStabby because it was smaller and easily hidden, but right now I didn’t want to pull it out of its ankle sheath and expose myself to the countess anymore.

I had a nice range of combat blades in my weapons case. I could hardly blame Daphne for wanting to protect herself. “Well... Where were you keeping it?”

She stared at me as if I was an idiot. “In my braids, of course.”

One of her thick braids was untangled. “Right.” I made a mental note to ask her how she managed to braid a KaBar into her hair without anyone—especially me, who was trained to look for those things—noticing. “Thanks.” I took the knife and got to work, slicing through the net quickly.

The countess sat up and brushed her arms and legs off fussily. “Well. That was a *deeply* unpleasant way to start the morning.”

“What happened, Your Grace?”

She looked up at me and arched an eyebrow. “Whyever would you want to know? It is hardly your business.”

I watched her thoughts for a moment. She had no idea what’d just happened, either. Despite her languid attitude, the countess was badly shaken. Nathaniel had told me she was a very powerful sorceress, someone to be feared and avoided at all costs.

But someone had just gotten the jump on her, and her confidence was severely rattled. Her thoughts bounced around, agitated, trying to fix on something that might make her feel better. She was as desperate as I was to make sense of what just happened.

I latched on to one image in her thoughts—a subconscious plea for comfort. “Please. Let me buy you a cup of tea, Your Grace, so you can refresh yourself before you head to the Flex Factory.”

She pursed her lips. “I suppose that would be acceptable.”

“Fantastic.” I helped her up, marveling for the millionth time at the gang tattoos covering every inch of her skin. I was desperate to know why she had them, but Nathaniel had no idea, so he couldn’t tell me when I’d asked.

We walked the short distance to Main Street, just a block and a half away, eyes half-closed against the bright morning sun. We headed for the little French cafe and bakery across the street from the Flex Factory, two doors down from the Hare and Hound, and I politely commandeered one of the outside tables so we could enjoy the fresh morning air.

Interrogation was a fascinating thing; it required strategy and planning and a deep understanding of human psychology. There were many methods, and I knew them all. Trickery worked; a well-designed con could get you the information you needed. You could compel with fear and simply torture the intelligence out of your victim, or alternatively, you might choose to relax your target to the point where they told you everything you needed to know willingly.

I always went with the latter. It was far easier, and the results were more honest. I had a lifetime of training in neuro-linguistic programming and manipulation, and falling back on my old skill set was not only easy, to my surprise, I found it quite enjoyable. Sweet Dumb Chloe was horrified that a nice old lady had been assaulted in the street, and she wanted to look after her. I fussed over the countess, making sure she had the best-positioned seat, and fetched her water and a scone while we waited for her tea. I even placed Daphne at the table next to us so the countess wouldn't be disturbed, which she approved of. She liked Daphne, though. Any little girl who carried a combat knife on her person got a tick of approval in her eyes.

She was still shaken, though, as she broke off a piece of her scone moodily.

"I'm so sorry you had a terrible start to your day," I said, avoiding her icy stare. "I can sympathize. Yesterday morning I found a dead brownie in the lake, and then I got abducted by werewolves."

"Oh, that pack of dogs took you, did they? I was wondering where you went. Nathaniel was beside himself, but then again, he is always quite emotional, isn't he? And Mona and Susanna were looking for you." She wrinkled her nose delicately. "I think they want you to schedule another class. I believe they are intimidated by my superior dance skills."

I nodded seriously. "I'm sure that's it."

"Nancy was looking for you, too. You haven't activated her new girlfriend's keycard yet."

"I got taken to Ironclaw. But I escaped."

“And you took a hostage with you.” The countess inclined her head towards Daphne and nodded approvingly. “Good work.”

“Er. Yes. Thanks.” I swerved the train of conversation back on-track. “I definitely had a terrible day yesterday, just like you. Do you think I need to be worried about black clouds throwing nets over me and trying to abduct me?”

The countess’s expression grew thunderous. “It wasn’t a cloud; it was a mere glamor on a transit van,” she said moodily. “A simple dark-magic spell. My attacker used the same glamor to disguise themselves, so I was unaware when they tossed the dulling-net over me.”

I let my mouth drop open in outrage. “How *dare* they? And what absolute idiots! Who would try to abduct the most magically powerful person in Castlemaine?”

Some of the tension in her face softened. “Unfortunately, I do not know who it was. The illusion never lifted. I was hit from behind with the dulling-net, but I managed to stun my attacker with some of my acquired defenses.”

I gazed at her. “What kind of defenses?”

“These,” she said simply, brushing her hand over her tattooed skin. “They are the physical manifestation of the soul contracts I have consumed over the years.”

“Oh! That’s *fascinating*,” I breathed out. “I haven’t heard of that before.”

“Why would you? Nobody has ever used soul contracts to fuel their magic. I am the first and the only person brave enough to do it.”

“Wow,” I said, examining the mishmash of gang tattoos. “That’s badass. How does it work?”

“The same way as a bone witch makes talismans with the skulls of ravens. It’s the same as a hearth witch using herbs and ingredients to make a potion, or a dark magic practitioner using blood of an innocent to fuel their curses. You take something tangible in this world, and you alter its molecular structure, releasing pure energy that you can then use for your

spells. Some witches use candles and crystals. I am not a witch. I am a sorcerer. I use psychological attachments.”

“Amazing.” I ran my eyes over the riot of color. “So, the tattoo is the manifestation of the attachment?”

“It’s a representation, not a manifestation. The tattoos represent a binding agreement between the member and the gang. A member will be coerced on a number of levels to join the gang—maybe they are blackmailed, or bribed, or emotionally manipulated. They may be entrapped with drug dependencies or promised riches if they join.”

“So, how do you get the attachment from the gang member in the first place?” I asked, leaning forward. “Do you siphon the attachment with a spell?”

She smiled, baring her teeth a little. “Oh no. I eat them.”

I hesitated for a beat. “Oh.”

“Not the whole thing,” she chuckled merrily at the expression on my face. “Just a piece of their heart. The place where the attachment is bound. The tattoo will appear on my skin as a visual representation of the soul contract I have consumed.”

I nodded. “Okay.” A thought bounced around in my head. Desperately, I tried to get back on track. “Is it only gang members you can eat?”

She shook her head. “Not at all. They’re just the most obvious ones. They are easier to find, and their life expectancy is already quite low, so I’m not making too many waves by targeting gang members. A lot of emotional investment goes into their soul contracts. The pain and suffering that is molded around the attachment is quite powerful, but they are easier to break and devour than other soul contracts.”

A vision of Jeb suddenly marched into the forefront of my mind. The story Sarah had shared on how he had become the Hellhound of Forest Hill.

Jeb had a soul contract. The spirits of the forest had latched onto him at the moment of his death, transforming him into the thing that the townspeople feared he was—a



hellhound. “Do you have to eat the heart to sever the attachment?” I asked the countess.

“No. It’s nice, though. Lightly braised with some red wine and garlic.” She smacked her lips. “But it can be offered willingly. It just hasn’t happened yet because it would require the subject to sever the attachment themselves so they could offer it to me.”

I nodded, deep in thought. The countess’s thoughts changed abruptly, though, pricking at my attention. She was suddenly annoyed she had shared this information about herself with someone. It was more than she’d shared in years.

I redirected the conversation smoothly before she could get too annoyed with herself and stop talking to me. “I hope it’s okay to share this with you, Your Grace,” I said. “I told you about the body that washed up on the lake yesterday. He was a brownie.”

She nodded curtly. “That is unusual. Brownies are fairly weak, magically speaking, but they are very tough to kill.”

“That’s why I thought I should mention it. We’ve found two more bodies, a vampire called Dante, and a dryad called Kaia. All of them had mysterious surgical marks on them. Do you think it’s possible to take the essence of someone’s power through some sort of surgical extraction?”

She brooded silently for a moment. “You think the person who accosted me was trying to take my magic from me?”

I shrugged. “Initially, I thought it might just be a serial killer, abducting residents and slicing them up for kicks. But since someone tried to take you, I think it might be something a little more sinister than that. You are far more powerful than any of the victims I found. So, either the perpetrator has gotten greedy and reckless, or they want something bigger than just a quick thrill from taking a life.”

Countess Greenwood ruminated on it for a moment, and I watched her thoughts. The dulling-net had stopped her from accessing her offensive powers, and while she’d been wrapped up in it, all she could do was activate a defensive spell which

glued her to the ground. Whoever had attacked her had been unable to force her off the pavement. Her assailant had been in the process of ripping her skin and, forcing her up when I interrupted them. The countess was still deeply disturbed by how methodically and how quickly the offender had incapacitated her.

“They had magic-nulling cuffs,” she spoke out loud. A vision of gleaming metallic handcuffs sprang up in her mind; her attacker had been trying to get them on her when I came along. “I have seen them only one other time in my life. Magic-nulling artifacts are far rarer than you would believe, and they take an enormous amount of dark magic to create.” She frowned and looked away. Something puzzled her.

“What?” I feigned alarm at her expression. “What is it, Your Grace?”

“A feeling,” she said. “The person who wielded the cuffs had no magic of their own. None at all. And they, themselves, had a soul contract so strong, it was as if they were an extension of it.”

I didn’t have to fake my confusion. “I don’t understand.”

The countess pursed her thin lips. “I am unsure of how I can dumb it down enough for you to understand, but I will try. The most powerful contracts are between an individual and a bigger entity with far more power, like a criminal gang, or a coven, or a spiritual collective.”

Like Jeb and the spirits who changed him into a hellhound. “I understand. Please go on.”

“The individual who attacked me had such a strong attachment they felt more like an extension of the entity they were bound to, rather than an individual. They felt rather soulless, if you can understand that. If they were a criminal gang member, I would say they felt more like the gang itself, rather than just a person who belongs to the gang.”

“They were abducting you for another entity?”

“Perhaps.” She lapsed into silence and looked away again. My gaze drifted over to where Daphne was using my KaBar to

whittle her name into the table. The countess was looking at her with an odd expression of fondness on her face.

So, it was not a serial killer attacking the residents of Castlemaine. Someone was abducting supernatural creatures and using them for a purpose. A sacrifice, maybe, to some sort of god? A way of siphoning magical powers to use within a black magic coven?

I picked at my blueberry muffin, making a mental note to save the rest for Dwayne. He loved blueberry muffins. “So far, they’ve targeted different supernatural species,” I noted. “A brownie, a dryad and a vampire. And now you.”

Daphne looked up from her carving and smiled shyly. “This could be a clue.” She held up a little black notebook.

I cocked my head, examining it. “Where did you get that?”

“It was on the ground beside the cloud. I saw it when it roared away, so I picked it up.”

She could have mentioned that sooner. I could have avoided having to play nice with the countess, even though an aspect of me—Sweet Dumb Chloe—had actually enjoyed having tea with the older lady.

Daphne passed the notebook to me, and I flicked through it quickly once, then again more slowly. Handwritten notes were jotted inside, only a third of the little notebook filled.

I’d seen lots of notebooks like this before. Cops used them to jot down details, so they didn’t miss anything important. Assassins used them for coordinates or codes, things they had to get perfectly accurate. The handwriting inside was spiky and sharp, the letters not joined up. Graphology—the assessment of handwriting to determine personality traits—wasn’t completely accurate, but it was sometimes useful. Stereotypically, sharp, spiky letters like the ones in the notebook generally indicated that the writer tended to be unsympathetic, hard and unforgiving. But I already knew that from the way they kept abducting and murdering the residents of Castlemaine.

None of the words made any sense at all. It was a simple code, though, easy to break as soon as you assigned the vowels. I flicked to the most worn page—obviously the most important one, since the bad guy had looked at it most often, and studied the jumbled letters carefully. In my mind’s eyes, the letters changed, slotting into place, and the words started to make sense.

The first word was shifter. A note next to it said, “low priority.” The second word was crossed out, and it said, “elemental.”

I looked down the list, deciphering the crossed-out words—vampire, fae, and witch. Next to the word “fae,” the bad guy had written the word “brownie,” and crossed out both. My nose wrinkled in disgust. “It’s a shopping list.”

The countess sighed. “How boring.”

“No, it’s a list of supernatural creatures the bad guy wants to procure,” I explained. “These words that have been crossed out are ones they’ve already gotten.” I pointed. “Brownie, vampire, elemental. Those creatures have shown up dead with weird cuts and some amputations. Witch is crossed out too, so I assume they’ve got one of them and we haven’t found the body yet. This word is shifter, and it says ‘common, low priority.’ I guess they haven’t got one yet because shifters are everywhere, and they can grab one at any time.”

She studied the list with more interest. “What are the other annotations next to some of the words?”

“This one,” I pointed. “It’s you. It says, ‘sorceress’ and the note next to it says ‘rare—high priority.’”

“Really.” The countess looked a little mollified. “And what about the other words?”

I quickly unraveled the rest of the code. “This one says ‘hellhound,’ but the note next to it says ‘unviable.’”

Looks like they decided it was too hard to grab Jeb. Also unviable, apparently, was the Willow River Entity, whatever that was, and the Vampire Lord. “Norma is on the list,” I added, seeing “cecaelia” there. “And Dwayne is on the list too.”

Both of them are marked high priority.” A wave of fury rushed through me. Whoever was doing this had their sights on my friends.

The countess stared at the page for a while. “It almost seems like a list of ingredients,” she mused, looking cool as a cucumber. “Like they’re gathering something for a big dark magic spell.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” I muttered under my breath. “Can you think of who would do something like this?”

She shrugged. “Someone like me, most likely. An ingredients list like that would pack an enormous magic wallop. You could do any number of things with that much blood magic—reanimate a corpse, open a portal to Hell so you can shove your rude neighbor in before they can drive you insane with their tuba practice.” Turning her head, she saw the look on my face. “Oh, don’t look at me like that, new girl. I was a little wild in my youth, but old age has tempered me somewhat. And besides, I barely ever took in the blood of an innocent. For my sins, I only ever took from evil people. And now, I will only eat the most despicable creatures.”

I carefully adjusted my expression. The countess and I were more alike than I thought. Although, these last few days, I was far less focused on killing evil creatures, and more focused on helping people.

Was that why I was feeling... better?

“Like Debbie.” The countess suddenly bared her teeth. “If that overly perky strumpet plays that stupid *na na na na* techno song in our Zumba class today, I’m going to flay her alive and suck the marrow from her bones.”

## CHAPTER 16



Nathaniel was sitting at reception looking flustered when we arrived. “There you are,” he said, sighing with relief. “I know I should be happy that you escaped from Ironclaw and everything, but I can’t figure out how to program the keycards, Nancy has been annoying me all morning. Kelly’s new card hasn’t been activated yet. And Mona can’t do the ten o’clock class anymore because her and Susanna are—” He caught sight of Daphne, hiding behind me, and his mouth dropped open.

The family resemblance was unmistakable. Daphne had exactly the same coloring as him. She looked just like a miniature version of Molly, just with bigger eyes.

“Is that... is that...?”

I smiled down at her. “Sure is.”

His gaze swung back up to me; his eyes wide. “Did you...?” A vision blazed through his aura—me rampaging through Ironclaw, disemboweling werewolves left and right, dragging the little girl behind me.

“Jesus, Nathaniel, no. I didn’t kill anyone.”

He gave me a sheepish grin. “You can’t blame me for thinking that.”

“Well, I didn’t. I got out without horribly murdering anyone.” This was getting annoying. I was used to people underestimating me. It was my superpower, and suddenly I stumbled into this insane magical place, and everyone thought I was a superhero. “I escaped, nobody died. Molly is still

alive.” I put my hands over Daphne’s ears. “You never told me your sister was a giant feral bitch.”

“Oh. Of course she is,” Nathaniel said. “She’s a werewolf. I wouldn’t say she was a giant, but female wolves are quite big, and they’re technically called bitches.” He rubbed his chin, frowning. “I don’t know if she’s domesticated or not. She pees in the bathroom, as far as I know, so I guess she’s not feral.”

“No, I mean she’s awful, Nathaniel. She’s a horrible person.”

He grinned and nodded. “Oh, yeah. Molly can be really mean, right?” His smile wobbled. “But she’s my sister. She’s my blood. I’ll never give up on her.”

God, he was adorably naïve. “She’s not going to leave Ironclaw, Nathaniel.”

He sighed. “I thought that might be the case. She’s not like me.” His eyebrows pinched together. “She can shift, and her wolf is quite strong. Molly is better suited to pack life than I am. I know she left Ironclaw with me just so I’d have a chance at life, and I’ll always love her for that.” His chin wobbled; he was on the verge of tears. “I’m grateful to her for risking her life for me.”

I opened my mouth and shut it again. Just like Sweet Dumb Chloe, Nathaniel always thought the best of people. It would be cruel to rub the truth in his face. Molly didn’t leave with him to save his life—I’d read that straight out of her thoughts. She left with him because she’d thrown herself at one of the older wolf boys in the pack, and he’d turned her down in favor of one of his own sisters, which was both unimportant and disgusting. Molly felt so humiliated when it happened, though, she agreed on a whim to leave with her brother when he begged her to run away. She regretted it the instant she left.

Molly didn’t care about her brother at all. The only time she thought about him was with blistering contempt.

I glanced down at Daphne, suddenly anxious. The little wolf was showing some sociopathic tendencies. I wondered if her mother's lack of empathy ran in the family. Would Nathaniel even be able to handle her?

Guess we were about to find out. Nathaniel crept forward and waved at her. "Hi, Daphne."

She peeked out from behind my legs. "Hello."

"Do you like coloring?"

"Coloring what?" Daphne frowned. "Do you mean like carving things?"

"He does," I told her. "But with pencils and pens, instead of knives."

"I've never had a pencil before," she said, her little brow furrowing.

I patted her gently. "Nathaniel will show you."

She looked at him. "Okay." Beaming, Nathaniel took her hands, and they disappeared together up the stairs, heading to his apartment over the gym. I breathed a sigh of relief. Nathaniel might be a poor guardian, but I was definitely a worse choice. I'd let her keep my knife.

Nancy poked her head out of the double-doors, her black Betty Page bangs framing her square head. Heavy black makeup ringed both her eyes and her mouth, an odd aesthetic choice for the gym. "There you are, Chloe. Kelly's keycard still isn't working." Her human girlfriend stood behind her, her hawkish features arranged in a glare. Kelly was very mad with Nancy; in her thoughts, she was standing over her like a drill sergeant, shouting at her for failing to arrange everything so that this mission to the gym ran smoothly. Despite being angry, the vision of Nancy was gold-tinted, as if the goth witch was very valuable to her. Kelly was triumphant at having gotten her hands on Nancy. She obviously loved her very deeply.

"Sorry, Nancy." I picked up a new keycard. "I'll get one programmed now, okay?"



Nancy pursed her lips. “Good.” In her own thoughts, Kelly was a giant moneybag. Nancy was equally triumphant about having Kelly, but was anxious to keep her happy, so that Kelly would keep giving her money. I kept my expression blank. It took me less than thirty seconds to program the new card. Hopefully they’d stop bugging me.

“Chloe!” Debbie bounced in, her golden blonde ponytail swishing behind her, giving the appearance of an over-enthusiastic dressage horse. “Can you turn up the volume on the stereo system? I’ve got an amazing new techno track on the set list, but it’s gotta be played *loud!*” She beamed at me like a maniac. “Loud loud *loud!*”

“Uh, okay.” I glanced through the double doors, seeing Countess Greenwood stretching in front of the stage, angry thunderclouds in her thoughts. “You know what, Debbie? I don’t think I can change it. The volume is set. We might need to get the audio engineer out here to adjust it.”

“No!” She stared at me, a slightly manic expression on her face. “Loud! It’s gotta be played loud!”

“Maybe you should ask the class members what they would like to listen to?”

Debbie laughed. “Don’t be silly. I am the dance leader! My job is to *lead!*” She wiggled her hips, aiming for a sexy shimmer, but she just reminded me of a horse trying to twitch flies off its rump. “Come on, Chloe. Turn the volume up! It can’t be impossible.” Her voice rose to an ear-splitting screech. “You can do anything if you put your mind to it!”

I abruptly changed the subject before I snapped and punched her in the face. “Actually, Debbie. While you’re here, I wanted to ask you if you knew someone. A brownie called Sammy—”

“Oh yeah, I knew him.” She grinned. “It was sad to hear he died.”

“You... uh. You don’t look sad.” Her thoughts showed an image of what I assumed was Sammy, the dead brownie, now

alive, lying back on a fluffy white cloud, grinning, with a jaw-droppingly massive erection. What the hell did that mean?

“How can I be sad?” Debbie punched me—too hard—on the shoulder. “What’s the *point* in being sad? We’re liquid and meat wrapped around a calcium frame, Chloe! We’re standing on a giant rock filled with lava, screaming through space, spinning at one thousand miles per hour, traveling twenty miles per second around a giant flaming gas ball! Everything is inconsequential!”

After a few more minutes, I decided that if Countess Greenwood wanted to eat Debbie, she was welcome to. And if she got eaten, I could cross her off my suspect list.

I settled down at the desk to work. A few more members drifted in, heading towards the weights. Mona and Susanna, the half-fae women, came in next.

Mona stopped at the desk. She looked paler than normal. Her skin was too white against her black pixie-cut hair. “Chloe, please let Nathaniel know that we won’t be back.”

“What?” I peered up at her, frowning. “You mean you’re canceling your memberships? Why?”

“Well, no, not exactly. Everyone knows you can’t cancel your membership.” She looked a touch uncomfortable. “We’re just going to cancel our credit cards rather than go through all Nathaniel’s paperwork. We just... we’re not coming back.”

“How come? Are you unhappy with something? Did something happen here at the gym?” I watched her thoughts carefully. They made no sense, but I committed them to memory anyway. Mona was thinking of herself and Susanna in a bubble. Explosions were going on outside of it, but they were happy and grinning away inside. But there were cracks in the side of the bubble.

“We’re leaving town. Don’t tell anyone,” she whispered. “We’re making plans to head back to Faerie. We think it will be safer there.”

“What do you mean, safer?”

She licked her lips nervously. “Most people in Castlemaine don’t realize it, but the world outside our town borders is crumbling to pieces, and we’re worried it’s only going to get worse.”

Adrenaline pricked at me. “Mona... what does that mean?”

The half-fae woman was riddled with anxiety. “Castlemaine is a bubble,” she said, explaining her thoughts. “This is a magical town, and we don’t have to hide anything here. As you know, the outside is not the same. The world is very volatile right now.”

I had no idea what she meant. There was nothing in the newspapers of any wars being declared, or anything like that. The normie world outside Castlemaine’s borders was ticking along just fine. The threat of the Lightbringers was still a whole year away; as far as I knew, there was no indication we were counting down to the apocalypse. “Why? Mona... what’s going on out there?”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about.” She shrugged. “There’s just a lot of anti-fae hate.”

That was news to me. As far as I knew, the Fae were not to be messed with. “Fae creatures are being persecuted?”

She gave me a sad smile. “Sort of. The supernatural ruling classes can be quite cruel sometimes. We just think it’s safer to leave this realm for a while, that’s all. We’re working on getting a portal to Faerie open, so we can go back. We have family in the Summerlands, and even though we’re half-human, we should be safe.” Her eyes grew wider. “We hope so, anyway.”

“Why aren’t you safe here?” I kept my gaze fixed on her face, while watching her thoughts in my peripheral vision. A huge, terrifying man flashed in her thoughts, charging through a ring filled with light, brandishing a sword.

A demon? Coming through a portal, maybe? Was someone killing the supernatural creatures of Castlemaine to summon a demon into the mortal realm? I tried to find the words to prod her thoughts. “Should I be worried?”

Mona sighed. “You’re human,” she said quietly. “You’ll be safe no matter what happens. You don’t have to worry about it.”

I swallowed but kept my expression blank. Opening a portal to another realm took an immense amount of power. Mona and Susanna, as half-fae, didn’t have much magic. I stared at her for a minute, trying to see if they had stooped to blood magic to fuel the portal spell, but got nothing from her thoughts.

“Besides,” Mona leaned closer. “If I have to listen to Debbie scream motivational soundbites at me one more time, I might snap and kill her.”

## CHAPTER 17



*A*gainst my better judgment, I left Daphne with Nathaniel for the night. It wasn't my place to demand anything else. He was her uncle and had far more rights to custody of her than I did. Idly, I wondered what would happen if I sent Child Protective Services to investigate Ironclaw. No doubt the social workers would never be seen again.

Nathaniel took her to his apartment upstairs, above the gym, and reassured me that he had everything covered to look after her. As it turned out, he had already paid a local witch a fortune to fashion a specially keyed ward to his little upstairs apartment, which prevented everyone except for direct blood relations from entering. The ward admitted Daphne, and it would probably allow Molly in, too, but the chances of Braxton Myles letting her mother go in to rescue Daphne were slim to none. It was better than nothing, and it was better than what I had at my place—no wards, a poltergeist, a hellhound, and whatever the hell Dwayne was.

When I left for the afternoon, Nathaniel and Daphne were building a dollhouse out of blocks. Nathaniel looked like he was having as much fun as she was. I bid them goodnight, and left the Flex Factory, slowly walking home in the beautiful golden late afternoon sun.

The beauty of the mountain town didn't soothe me, though. Anxiety itched at me, a feeling of impending doom that refused to leave no matter what I did. I got home and found it empty, so I cleaned up the house a little, made myself

a sandwich for an early dinner, and listened to the ear-splitting racket of Meadow's children playing in the yard next door.

Glancing through the French doors, I spotted Dwayne waddling up from the lake, his eyes narrowed to angry slits. He found the sound of the kids next door particularly annoying, and it hadn't gotten any easier for him to deal with, judging by the vision in his thoughts.

I tapped on the window, frowned, and waved my finger at him, and mouthed, *don't do it*.

He curled his beak. He was going to. The loud kid climbing on the beanpole looked particularly plump and juicy.

"Goddamnit." I scrambled outside, shoved a leftover piece of blueberry muffin into his mouth, and wrestled him towards the cottage.

Meadow poked her head out of her backdoor just as I was hustling Dwayne up the path.

She spotted me. "Blessed neighbor, how are you?" She picked her way over her children, happily gamboling in the mud at her feet, and made her way towards me, clearly intending on having a nice chat over our shared picket fence.

"Oh, I'm fine, thanks, Meadow." I kicked Dwayne with my foot, shoving him inside the French doors, and slamming them firmly before turning back to her. "How are you?"

"Bear is teething," she said ruefully. "And Moonflower broke her arm falling off the beanpole yesterday. She has a cast, the poor cherub." She shook her head and smiled serenely. "The wait at the hospital was frightful. Moonflower was in such pain."

"Oh," I said, watching her thoughts, noting that they didn't match her words at all. In her mind, she got the doctor in a headlock and punched him in the face until he reset the bone properly.

The vision didn't feel real; it was just Meadow's mood. She was weird and intense. I got the feeling that she would murder anyone who hurt her children; the ferocity within her thoughts was quite something, especially in contrast to her

serene expression. I'd assumed Meadow was a witch or magic user of some other sort, so Dwayne needed to stop trying to eat her children when she wasn't looking or he'd find himself on the end of some nasty curse.

Although, Meadow was a vegan, so maybe she'd cut him a break.

"Poor kid," I said, glancing down at a mud-covered child waving her bright-pink cast around. "I hope she's okay."

"Moonflower will be just fine. Children are miracles, aren't they?"

"Oh, yeah." One of her miracles was trying to force another little miracle to eat a slug. "They're great. Listen, Meadow. Did you hear about that body that washed up on the shore yesterday?"

Her eyes widened. "I did. *So* tragic. Sammy was a lovely man. Fabulous in bed, too."

"Oh. That's... er... nice."

"Brownies are very well endowed," she said, her voice thickening. "Now that he's dead, I regret that I turned him down the last time he propositioned me." Her attention wandered. "Bear, no, darling, you can't stab your sister with that picket, that's unkind. Calendula... sweet angel, that butterfly needs its wings. Would you be happy if someone pulled your arms off? No? Well, in that case, please let it go."

I took the opportunity to ghost out from the conversation and walked inside, thinking carefully. It sounded really victim-blamey to mull over the promiscuity of the dead, but it had now become an established connection. Sammy the brownie was a player, Kaia was a hoe, and Dante the vampire was obsessed with younger human women. The only one that didn't match the profile was the countess, but she'd been marked in the notebook as high priority.

So had Dwayne.

Unsettled, I marched into the kitchen, and found Dwayne popping open a can of beer by stabbing it with his beak,

tipping it over on the counter, and lapping it up out of a puddle.

I picked up the nearly empty can and smacked it back upright. “We need to talk.”

He glanced up at me and cocked his head, eyes narrowed.

I watched the visions in his aura and sighed. “I know you can’t talk. I’m not an idiot, and I’m not having a mental breakdown. Just... just listen, would you?”

He made a show of bending down to slurp up the rest of the puddle of beer, then, he settled down on a stool, and finally nodded at me graciously to begin talking.

I quickly explained what happened to the countess this morning and the new clues I’d found. “So that’s it. Someone is targeting unique supernatural creatures, and you’re one of them. So be careful.”

He rolled his eyes and let out a sarcastic honk.

“I know you can take care of yourself, Dwayne. But so can the countess, and she nearly got abducted. If her attacker had managed to get those magic-nullifying cuffs on her, I’d be finding her cut-up body somewhere on the outskirts of town right about now.” I pointed at him sternly. “You’re not all-powerful, Dwayne. Don’t forget how we met.”

He hissed at me.

“If a handful of stupid beta werewolves can get the better of you and shove you into a reinforced metal crate, then the Castlemaine Killer probably can, too. Just be careful. That’s all I’m saying. Apart from the countess, the killer seems to be going for promiscuous supes.”

He wagged his eyebrows at me.

“Yes, I know you’re a slut, Dwayne, that’s why I mentioned it. Just... Don’t go home with strange women, okay?”

A vision popped into his thoughts—a gorgeous curvy woman, but it was gone before I could focus on it.



I peered at him closer. “Is that...?”

He hissed at me again, telling me to go fuck myself, and waddled off to watch T.V.

## CHAPTER 18



Night fell, the town grew quiet, and I still felt uneasy. Anxiety pricked at me, refusing to ease no matter what I did. Just before midnight, I succumbed to my natural programming and decided to try and murder someone to take the edge off.

I hadn't spoken to Alaar Abara for a couple of days. It made sense to go talk to him now—and, because he was still on my list, it made sense to go try to murder him, too. For some reason I couldn't let go of the idea that I had to finish my vengeance list. Everyone on my list had to die, including Alaar, because he created monsters. He'd created me.

Yes, I needed therapy.

If I couldn't kill him, I'd at least be able to ask him a few questions. Alaar had lived in Castlemaine for centuries, and he was an expert in strategy, so he would definitely have some insights into what might be going on in town. I scraped my hair up into a ponytail, threw on a tracksuit and some runners, tossed a few key items into my backpack, strapped as many weapons as I could to my body, and jogged slowly up the mountain.

The town was quiet. Even the night creatures were lying low, almost as if the whole town suspected that one of their own was trying to kill them—like a freckle on a body turning malignant, suddenly you were suspicious of all freckles and moles.

I pushed myself hard up the mountain, channeling my anxiety into physical exertion, running right up to Alaar's compound. I shimmed around the wall into the thick forest and examined the wall carefully as I'd done many times before—twelve feet tall, sheer metal and topped with razor wire. There were also electrical wires buried under the dirt. I'd disabled them before to get in and tunneled underneath, but since then, he'd put extra security on his fuse box. I wasn't about to do the same thing twice. Alaar was particularly scornful of repeating mistakes.

I transferred my wire cutters to a shoulder pocket, slipped my shoes off and stuffed them in my backpack, and donned my magnetic gloves and socks. These things were stupidly expensive and an absolute bitch to use. It sounded easy, but you had to be quite physically light and have insane muscle strength and conditioning to use them. A slight lapse in concentration, and I'd be on my ass in the dirt.

It took me four tries, crawling like a lizard to the top. I clipped the razor wire, clearing a section for me to shimmy over, and landed silently at the rear of his dark compound.

I didn't know where Alaar slept. When I stayed here as a kid, I slept on the floor in the kitchen. There was a sliding door off his living space which I assumed was his bedroom, so I headed towards his little house, moving silently like a ghost through his compound.

I froze when I spotted him sitting on his meditation stone outside. A stack of old books and several tubes lay next to him—scrolls, by the look of it. He was studying one of them by lamplight.

Silently, watching him carefully, I pulled out my throwing knives.

Contrary to popular belief, throwing knives actually sucked as weapons. They were mostly useless in combat—you had to toss them with almost superhuman force to get them to penetrate far enough to do any damage, and if someone was coming at you, it wasn't going to stop them. Most of the time, all you got was a flesh wound and an angry target. You had to

be insanely accurate to hit anything that might instantly disable and lead to your victim's death.

Luckily for me, I was insanely accurate.

I got into position, focused, took note of the wind, the atmospheric pressure, the humidity, the curve of Alaar's neck, the miniscule way he moved when he drew breath... If I could just get my knife jammed in between C1 and C2, I could kill him almost instantly.

I exhaled and let loose. Alaar's hand shot out like a whip. He plucked the knife out of midair, not even bothering to turn and face me. "You are late," he said in his low, guttural voice.

My shoulders slumped; I exhaled heavily. "What do you mean, I'm late?"

"It is past midnight. I expected you to visit me to discuss your problem once you got off work. Come, child." He patted the stone next to him. "Join me."

I groaned audibly. "Am I ever going to be able to kill you?"

"Perhaps. I would expect I would be relatively easy to kill once you understand what my weaknesses are."

I stared at him for a moment. "What are your weaknesses?"

"If I told you, *nin*, you would find it easier to kill me. I shall keep that information to myself for now." Alaar's face was expressionless, as usual. That was probably why, despite the fact he was hundreds of years old, he didn't have any wrinkles. The only indication of his age was his bald head and the blazing intelligence in his ash-brown eyes.

Sulkily, I trudged over and folded myself down into a cross-legged position beside him. It really was beautiful up here. This high up the mountain the clouds felt so much closer, like I could reach out and touch them. "This is nice," I said, breathing in the cool night air. The town lay below us, a silent, sleeping giant, twinkling with the odd light in the darkness. "What are you doing up here so late, anyway?"

He gestured towards the scroll lying in his lap. “I am attempting another translation of the prophecy.”

“Oh.” Malik had mentioned it to me once before. “The one about the Lightbringers?”

“Yes.”

I smirked. “You still think I’m going to be the one to have a baby that fights them and stops the end of the world?”

He turned, his dark brown eyes watching me for a moment. “Yes. Chop chop, *nin*. Ready your uterus.”

“Urgh.” I rolled my eyes. “This is no time for jokes.”

“If there comes a time when you cannot laugh, then mankind is indeed doomed.”

“Fair enough.” I swept my legs underneath me, getting comfortable. “Tell me about the prophecy.”

He gestured to the pile of scrolls at his feet. “Many oracles and soothsayers have focused their visions on the end of the world. Most have been disregarded as nonsense, merely deranged rantings of those afflicted with mental illness or addled by substances. But there was one ancient Sumerian tablet that foretold the coming of the Lightbringers, who would be responsible for bringing about the end of Mankind.” He frowned; a tiny downturn of his thin lips, the first display of emotion I had seen. “I would disregard it as nonsense like all the rest, however, on a similar tablet by the same author, they accurately foretold several paradigm-shifting events. World War Two, for example, is mentioned, and the rise of social media as a means of disseminating information is another.” He picked up a stack of photos and flicked through it, showing me a stone tablet with cuneiform script carved into it.

I frowned, annoyed that I didn’t understand any of it. “Ancient languages aren’t really my forte, Alaar.”

“Crudely translated, it basically says this: There will come a time when one will dance, and the scene can be captured in a box, and duplicated, copied, and spread like wildfire around

the world. First dance, then social issues, and the truth can be disseminated amongst the population just as easily as lies.”

I frowned. “Did this ancient Sumerian tablet predict YouTube?”

“So it would seem. It makes sense; the author focused on things that changed the course of mankind—the industrial revolution, airspace travel, and the twin towers. The Lightbringers prophecy is the last one.”

“Well. That’s not good.”

“Indeed, it is not. But it does specifically note that the only thing that will stop the Lightbringers is the White Winged Child of the Wilds.”

I let out a humorless chuckle. “That’s catchy.”

“It doesn’t rhyme in Sumerian, *nin*. The child is said to have enormous white wings and will be a creature of the mortal realm, a human born of the fractured gods of the Wilds.”

“Malik says it’s impossible.”

“He is correct. We cannot reproduce.”

“Yeah, that part I don’t understand. Your bodies are human. Why are you infertile?”

“It’s not that our bodies are incompatible with bringing forth life,” Alaar explained. “It is more that our souls belong to different universes. To create a child, both parents must summon a soul being from the astral plane, and the fractured gods cannot summon, they can only create. On a metaphysical level, we are incompatible with humans.”

“Well...” I ran through options in my head. “What if you boned one of your siblings?”

He raised his eyebrows and looked at me for a long time. “That seems... distasteful, somehow.”

“You’re not proper siblings, though, are you?”

“Not in the human sense of the word, no. It just seems very unlikely that we would be sexually attracted to each other. And

I am unsure if two gods would be able to call forth a mortal soul.”

“Would it work, though?”

“Possibly.” He stroked his chin. “But if they called forth a mortal soul to gestate in their womb, that child would be essentially human. It would not have access to godly powers, and it would not have white wings.” He turned to me, and gave me his version of a smile—a miniscule incline of his lips. “You have given me much to think about, *nin*. However, ultimately it is too late. The Lightbringers have informed us that we have less than a year to find the rest of our lost siblings and bring them home to the Wilds before they come here to collect. There is no white-winged child now, and it is too late for one to be produced.”

I imagined a little cherub baby, fluttering his little wings into a horde of battle-ready gods. “You still think that I’ve got something to do with it, though.”

“I do. Your birth chart is explosive. It is quite unique and suggests you are compatible with the celestial.” He let out a tiny breath; it was his version of a weary sigh. “I do admit I assumed that it would be you that bore the white-winged child. It was my only hope, in fact.” His eyes flickered over my face again. “I don’t suppose you’ve had an infant in the last twenty years, and neglected to tell me?”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but I’ve had a contraceptive implant in my arm since I got my period at twelve years old,” I told him. “Daddy actually thought about giving me a full hysterectomy just in case my lady bits interfered with my work. He decided against it, just in case he ever had to sell me for breeding purposes. Which he did end up trying to do, when I was Sweet Chloe. But no, sorry, Alaar. I haven’t had a baby. And I’m not pregnant right now. No plans to get knocked up in the future, either.” The idea of having children scared the shit out of me. Even having Daphne in my care made me anxious. Kids were so breakable. So unforgiving. And I would make a terrible mother, considering I handed out combat knives to six-year-old girls.

Alaar turned back to his scrolls. “All may be lost.”

“Not really.” I shrugged. “Maybe we deserve it. Humans do kinda suck. And if it means that the rest of the universe gets to live, well, then, maybe it’s a good thing.”

“For my part, I like this realm,” Alaar said, breathing out slowly, another weary sigh. “I enjoy being corporeal.”

I patted his hand. “Don’t get cocky. I will kill you one day. And anyway, Malik still might find all the fractured gods before the clock runs out.”

Alaar frowned. “It is unlikely. There is a reason that the prophecy exists. I assume the Lightbringers are coming to kill all humans, no matter what.”

Speaking of killers... “Actually, there was another reason I came to see you,” I said, adjusting my legs underneath me. I couldn’t sit in the lotus position on a rock for longer than ten minutes like he could; my ass was too sore. “Someone—or something—is abducting supernatural creatures in town, slicing them up, chopping bits off, and dumping them on the outskirts of town. Different creatures,” I added. “So far, a brownie, a vampire, a dryad and a witch, although we haven’t found the witch’s body. They tried to take the Countess Ebadorathea Greenwood, but they drove off when I interrupted them.”

Silence fell between us for a moment. “Indeed.” Alaar rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Interesting.”

“We found a notebook at the scene. It looks like a shopping list of creatures they need, for some unknown purpose.”

“Hmmm.” He gazed off into the distance for a while. I watched his thoughts idly, as they clicked and flicked like a Rolodex. *If this, then that. If this, then that.* Files slid in and out, updating with new information, calculating possibilities, envisioning every likely outcome and scenario.

The man was like a strategy computer. I fed him a little more data. “The countess said that the person who tried to grab her had a soul contract so strong, they almost felt like an



extension of the entity they were bound to. What do you think that means?"

His thoughts flickered again. "Her attacker is wholly devoted to a cause," he finally said. "The type of soul contract Countess Greenwood consumes is usually the weakest type," he explained. "The gang members' connections are often weak because they are coerced. Acolytes usually have the strongest connections. Zealots, like my brother Kanaim, would do anything for the entity they worship."

"So, you think the cut-up bodies are sacrifices to some god or something?"

"No." He shook his head. "If it were a sacrifice, I doubt the bodies would be found. The fact that the dead have resurfaced tells a different tale."

I nodded slowly. "A serial killer leaves a dead body to display his trophy, to enhance his fame. A hunter might display a corpse so the victim's family can see it, to lure them in so he might capture them, too."

"Or they may be doing it to force a desirable reaction. Perhaps to create panic."

I frowned, thinking about it. "You think the bodies are left to create panic? For what purpose?"

"It is a mere theory, *nin*. I suspect that the reason is bigger than we think, bigger than this town. The ties between the mortal realm and the supernatural have been shaken lately. Perhaps that has something to do with it. My advice is to look outside the town for answers."

A fragment of conversation echoed in my ears. Molly and her mother, Julie, talking about Ironclaw's new neighbors. Discussing how Braxton Myles wanted Dwayne back, because he obviously came from the neighbors. They had been speculating, and I'd disregarded it, because I knew for a fact that Dwayne came from somewhere... else.

Ironclaw had new neighbors. And they were powerful enough that Braxton Myles wanted to curry favor by returning what he thought might be their property.

I could have slapped myself for not taking that piece of information more seriously. A new magical death cult? A bunch of powerful demon worshippers, perhaps?

“Look outside the town,” I muttered to myself, looking down on the sleeping giant below. “That’s a good place to start.”

He leaned over and gave me a nudge. “Go, *nin*. Try to kill me again tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER 19



I walked out of Alaar's compound slowly, running all the clues back in my mind. A shadow flickered above me; a wild gale of wind blew my ponytail into my mouth, and I spluttered in an undignified fashion for a long moment, my cheeks flushing, because I knew exactly what was coming. My body felt it before the lights above me dimmed, before the wind picked up, and responded by sending a surge of warm blood to the sensitive spot between my thighs.

*Stop it*, I told my vagina sternly.

The shadows coalesced, and Malik was standing in front of me, dressed in combat gear—cargo pants, a tactical vest, heavy boots and a skin-tight black long sleeve shirt doing its best to contain the thick slabs of muscle that covered every bit of his body. That gorgeous tousled dark hair hung loose, framing his strong jaw, the high cheekbones, the flashing dark eyes.

He crossed his arms over his massive chest; his biceps bulged. “Woman.” He nodded at me.

“I have a name, you know.”

He grunted. “I am aware.”

“Why don't you use it?”

“It does not suit you.” His hot eyes ran over me. “Chloe West is a perfectly suitable mortal moniker, but for you, it feels... mundane.”

I raised my eyebrows. “That’s a little mean. Chloe is a beautiful name. And you don’t think ‘woman’ is mundane?”

He took a step closer to me. “It suits you better. It is what you encompass; it is what you are. Femininity is soft and yielding, but also ferocious and formidable. Its strengths are many. It is what you are. You are woman.”

I chewed on my lip for a second. When I could trust myself to speak, the words came out in a rough whisper. “I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “Women are also infuriating.”

“Again, that sounds like a good thing to me.” I couldn’t look at him anymore, so I turned away and walked over to Alaar’s car—a little brown hatchback, parked just outside the gates. I pulled out a telescopic bar from my backpack, extended it, and examined the window carefully.

He watched me. “Are you stealing my brother’s car?”

“No, I’m dancing the Charleston on top of an elephant,” I muttered under my breath. “Yes, of course I’m stealing his car.”

“Why?”

“I need to check something out,” I said, wriggling the lock pick down between the window and the car door. “Our mystery serial killer might not be a serial killer after all. It might be something a little more sinister.”

“I see.” He’d moved closer to me; I could almost feel the heat of his body caressing my back. It took everything I had to ignore him and keep working on unlocking Alaar’s car. After a moment, Malik let out an exasperated noise. “I cannot come with you.”

“You weren’t invited.”

“I must go now,” he said, ignoring me. “Mavri has located another one of our siblings, perhaps the last one outside of this continent. He needs me to awaken her so that she can return home.”

“Can’t he do that himself?”

“He is newer to enlightenment than I am. He does not know how.”

“Oh.”

Silence fell between us; I refused to turn around. The atmosphere thickened, and my skin tingled in anticipation.

After another long moment, Malik shifted on his feet; I heard the rough scrape of his boots on the gravel. “Perhaps you should wait until I can accompany you.”

“Nope,” I said shortly. “People are dying, Malik. I don’t want any other bodies washing up outside my cottage when I’m trying to enjoy my morning coffee.”

“We are barreling full steam towards the apocalypse,” he muttered. “It seems insignificant in the scheme of things.”

“Not to me,” I said. “And not to whoever the next victim is. It’s a slippery slope when you start weighing up the significance of people’s lives, Malik.”

It was one of the reasons I hadn’t followed through with creating a Redemption app. For one, only I could decide whether I’d done enough to wash my soul clean. And secondly, you can’t quantify people’s existence. It was just too complicated. “I’m not going to stand by idly and let a killer slice up residents of Castlemaine,” I added, jiggling my lock pick a little more vigorously.

“Will you tell me where you are going?”

The pick latched onto the car’s locking system; I pulled up and unlocked the car. “I’m going to go do a little reconnaissance outside the town, see what I can see, and mull over all the clues in my head so far.”

There was a beat of silence. “What if I asked you to come with me instead?”

“Do you need me?” I made the mistake of turning to face him.

He looked into my eyes for a long moment; a shiver ran down my spine. Finally, he broke eye contact, and looked

away. “Not for this mission, no. Mavri has already identified which body our sister is in.”

“Cool.” I got into the car, used my knife to snap open the dashboard, and started fiddling with the wires. It was lucky for me Alaar drove such an old car; the newer ones were impossible to hot-wire.

“The remainder of our lost siblings are close by,” Malik went on. “Either in Castlemaine, or in the surrounding towns. I will need your assistance with locating them. Their energy is too scattered this close to the slipways; I cannot focus clearly enough.” He frowned, the hard line of his jaw somehow growing more overwhelmingly masculine. “The town has grown exponentially in the last few years. There are many newcomers.”

The car roared to life, and I grinned and revved the engine, then flicked the sunshade down and caught the car keys as they fell from their hiding spot.

Malik frowned. “You knew they were there?”

“Of course.”

“Why go through all the trouble of breaking the locks and hot-wiring the car?”

I grinned up at him. “A concert pianist still has to practice their scales, Malik.”

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. “Meet me at The Hare and Hound later,” he said. “And... Woman...”

His thoughts blazed with a tangle of images for a second—soft skin, rough stubble, a slick wetness and a tantalizing hardness... I squeezed my eyes shut. A shiver ran through me. “Yes, Malik?”

“Be careful.”

## CHAPTER 20



I drove down the mountain slowly, stopping on the east ridge to say hi to Jeb, who was haunting the forest in hellhound mode for the night. From what Dwayne had told me, I knew Jeb didn't sleep. He was a spirit creature. His whole default mode was to stalk and haunt and generally be spooky.

Under all that, though, he was a good kid. I crept into the woods, waiting until the air grew cold and the trees started to whisper to each other, and sang him the dirtiest song I could think of. The forest returned to normal, but Jeb didn't reappear as a boy or as a hound.

Something was bugging him. I got the feeling it was something to do with Daphne's appearance. I guessed it was because I'd rescued her, and nobody had rescued him when he was a kid. Instead, because of a birth defect that caused him to grow hair all over his body, he was bullied, persecuted, betrayed, and lynched, and finally, burned to death over a fire and turned into a hellhound.

He wasn't really a hellhound, though. It was just for show. What he really was was a hairy young teen who kept stealing my milk.

I wondered if the countess would consider devouring his soul contract, freeing him from his ties to the spirits that changed him into a hellhound. If it *was* possible, it would mean he'd become mortal. Except... since he was a couple of hundred years old, his body might crumble to dust. Jeb would be gone for good.

Dwayne probably wouldn't let me. He'd miss his fishing buddy.

I drove back down to Main Street, slowly checking out the stores. All the lights were off in the Flex Factory apart from one faint glow of a nightlight in the upstairs window—Nathaniel's apartment.

The thump of music spilled out of the Hare and Hound across the road. As I drove by, the door opened, and several vampires spilled out. I recognized Jerry and Terry in their matching sweater vests, holding hands as they crossed the street.

I turned off Main Street, following the road out of Castlemaine, and headed towards Calimesa. As I drove out of the town limits, it felt like the enormous mountain disappeared in the blink of an eye, and suddenly, the rolling hills were brown rather than lush and green. There was nothing out this way, though—just the normie world. My instincts were telling me I was going the wrong way—soon, I'd hit Calimesa. I turned around and drove back, already weirdly homesick for the supernatural town I'd left behind.

Castlemaine welcomed me back, and I turned onto the long winding road back up the mountain, heading right, to the dirt road that ran over the western ridge. I paused on the top, reluctant to head into Ironclaw territory. There was nothing else I could do, though. Molly's words rang in my head—new neighbors.

Who were these new neighbors?

If there were new neighbors behind the mountain, hidden in between Castlemaine and the Badlands, there must be more roads leading there. On impulse, I stopped and dug out my phone, looking at the satellite maps of the area I had saved.

There was no room for any new neighbors, as far as I could see. Ironclaw was sandwiched right between the mountain and the Badlands, and it was impossible to get through the Badlands. Except...



There was a significant narrowing between those endless rocky ridges, right in the middle of the range. I wondered if someone had cut a track through there and set up camp right next to the shifters. There was no way to find this hypothetical track, though, not unless I drove several hours back around to the other side of the Badlands, and tried to find a path that just shouldn't be there.

I dug through my memories, thinking of the road outside the shifter village. It was possible that there was another road leading off the main dirt track toward the mountain.

There was nothing for it. I'd have to get closer to Ironclaw to see.

I drove slowly down the ridge, careful to keep the windows wound up in case any roving werewolves were patrolling, my eyes compulsively sweeping the sides of the road. My heart started pounding as Ironclaw came into sight down below, the sinister antlers displayed on the gates barely visible in the moonlight.

There—on the ground, I spotted a hint of a tire track. I spun the wheel, turned off the dirt road and followed it. Scrubby bushes scraped the sides of the little hatchback for about half a mile, before the trees inexplicably cleared.

A lonely shack sat in the middle of the clearing—a tiny, one-bedroom cottage. The door hung open, sagging on the upper hinge. The shack sat on uneven heavy concrete foundations, the wooden structure clearly crumbling at the edges.

My eyes found the details. The porch was old, the paint peeling, the timber splintered and cracked, the nails gleaming in the wood. Dust covered the roof. One of the panels was a different color to the rest. There was no outhouse, no indication of a water pump, and no pipes, no septic tank anywhere that I could see.

On the ground around the shack, I found more hints of tire tracks. The place looked abandoned, but someone had been here very recently.

A howl floated through the air; I hit the gas, skidding into a turn, and drove away.

## CHAPTER 21



I found another dead body on the way back. In fact, I almost ran over it.

A few hundred yards away from the top of the west ridge of the mountain, a tiny naked body blew into my path, flopping carelessly in the wind, rolling in the dirt road. I braked, listened carefully for a moment, confident that there were no werewolves about to jump out and ambush me, and climbed out of the car.

I'd never seen one before, but I assumed the tiny creature in the road was a pixie. The little creature was male, only the length of my forearm, with a concave chest, long limbs, pointed ears, and large dark purple gossamer wings which looked like they'd been fed through an office shredder. His pearl-white skin was crisscrossed with cuts, too, and part of one hand was missing.

I scooped him up, wrapped him in my jacket, and got back in my car. Sweet Dumb Chloe seemed to be taking control of my body, and I couldn't stop her. My hands shook, and my vision was red-tinged with rage.

Who would do something like this? Who would carefully dissect a tiny sentient creature like that poor little pixie? What kind of fucking monster would abduct an innocent creature, torture them, and throw them away carelessly to rot, like they were a piece of worthless garbage?

The Hare and Hound was still blaring music when I arrived. I walked in, ducking my head as I stalked through the

little door, still shaking with rage.

My anger turned into something else as I strode down the steps into the darkness of the bar, head-first into a fog of late-night revelry. Ice Cold Killer Chloe stirred within me, sensing it was time to work, and she took over, banishing my emotions, regulating my heartbeat, and focusing my gaze.

The bar's lights were dimmed, and the music throbbed with a pounding bass. It was Friday night, and every inch of the place was packed with townspeople. There was an edge to the atmosphere, though, a dangerous hedonistic thrill, a sense of carelessness, and an undercurrent of terror that made patrons throw back their drinks and laugh with far more wild abandon.

Collective consciousness was a funny thing. Most of these people had no idea that the townspeople were being hunted, mutilated, and murdered. But they all felt it, deep in their bones.

Debbie's smiling round face stepped into my line of vision. "Chloe!" she screeched and threw her arms around my neck. "Darling! It's so good to see you!"

"Yeah." I didn't smile. "It's only been a few hours since I saw you last, after all."

Debbie's curvy body was wrapped in a low-cut, skintight leopard-print dress, her honey blonde hair curled into bouncy waves. She tottered on her stilettos, obviously very drunk, her eyes narrowed and bloodshot. "I'm so happy you're here!" She beamed at me. "Come, I'll buy you a drink."

I didn't want to be anywhere near her right now. Maybe it was unfair, but Debbie was annoying. "I'm okay, thanks, Debbie."

She wrapped her arm through mine and tugged at me drunkenly. "Come on. You look like you could use some cheering up. Let's get shots! Woo *hoooo!*"

"No fucking way," I said, faux cheerfully.

"Don't be a party pooper, Chloe!" she screeched in my ear. "The night is young and so are we. Shots! Shots! Shots!"

I'd reached my limit. "Okay," I said. "Let's go."

"Woo *hooo!*" She swiveled on her heel, turning towards the bar, and I kicked at the point of her stiletto at a crucial point in her turn. Debbie careened wildly into two vampire men behind us and tumbled to the floor, rolling like a leopard-print bowling ball. I melted backwards into the crowd and continued my surveillance.

Behind the bar, Nancy the goth witch was scuttling back and forth, her black lips turned down in a deep frown. She snapped at a new young female bartender who raced between the counter and the beer taps, trying to serve people as quickly as possible.

Nancy watched her, irritated. In her thoughts, she was kicking everyone out and going home with Kelly, who sat on a barstool in the corner, nursing a club soda, watching everyone with hawkish, jealous eyes.

Initially, I'd felt sorry for Kelly. It was obvious from Nancy's thoughts that she was only with Kelly for her money, judging by the way that Nancy often visualized her girlfriend as a stack of cash. But now, watching the way the older human woman curled her lip and sneered at the singing, dancing crowd of supernatural creatures in front of her, she clearly thought she was better than all of them. She was thinking of herself at the top of a pyramid, with all of them writhing underneath her. It wasn't unusual for powerless humans to feel bitter about it, though. I couldn't really blame her.

I recognized quite a few faces in the crowd, gym members, mostly, and some faces I'd cataloged while combing the town's online newspaper. The girl who made saddles at the tack shop down the street was there, talking happily with a young man who I knew was a teacher at the high school.

Even the Countess Ebadorathea Greenwood was there, wearing a structured gown of deep-purple raw silk with an emerald sash, her white hair swept back in a perfect French roll. Her outfit was probably more suited to a royal reception rather than a grungy bar, but nobody would dare tell her that.

She sipped on a dirty martini and watched the crowd with her sharp eyes, but nobody looked back at her.

Sitting on a table by the fireplace, Mona and Susanna talked with their heads together. The two half-fae women hadn't left yet. Good. I needed to speak to both of them.

My eyes drifted around the room, almost overwhelmed by not just the vast array of people jammed into the tiny space, but by their thoughts dancing through their auras. Strange images floated all through the crowd, visions of the most secret and not-so secret desires—beer, shot glasses and bottles, of puckered lips and bare breasts and enormous throbbing cocks, shining gold street tacos on the stumbling walk home, a dead blonde girl with her throat ripped out—

I peered through the gloom, trying to focus on the last vision.

There it was, in a corner on the other side of the dance floor—a pretty blonde girl, just a thought whirling through someone's aura. Blood splattered her face, and her eyes were open and glassy in his thoughts.

Huh. That blonde girl was me.

The thoughts belonged to a man with gaunt cheeks, sharp hazel eyes, thinning light-brown hair, and a scraggly orange beard. I recognized him immediately; he was one of the werewolves that had come to abduct me and take me to Ironclaw. At the time, he'd kept his head down and stayed close to Braxton Myles, sitting in the cab of his truck with him.

Now, he sat in a dark corner of the Hare and Hound, glowering at the crowd around him, and he thought about finding me and ripping out my throat. My vision sharpened; my pulse slowed. I'd just found an outlet for my anger.

I half-turned, facing away from him, and edged closer, moving amongst the revelers in the bar, watching his thoughts out of the corner of my eye. Along with an image of me dying horribly under his claws, other visions floated through his aura. He thought of his Alpha standing above him, snarling

with his muzzle pulled back, his fangs only inches from his throat.

Braxton Myles was mad at him. My vision tunneled as I surreptitiously watched him think about the reason why.

An image of a teenage girl bloomed in his mind's eye—battered, bruised, blood covering the apex of her thighs, eyes staring dully at the ceiling. Even as obviously dead as she was, in his thoughts, her lips were turned up in a smirk, as if she was happy he was about to get into trouble for killing her.

I'd been watching people's thoughts long enough to understand them. This asshole had "accidentally" killed a female wolf, one of his packmates, and his Alpha was going to be furious when he found out about it. Instead of sticking around Ironclaw to face Braxton's wrath, this asshole decided to go rogue, sneak into Castlemaine, track down the blonde bitch who'd escaped with one of the pack's pups, bring her head back to Ironclaw, and present it to his Alpha. Hopefully, Braxton Myles would be happy with the compensation.

This werewolf had come to the Hare and Hound because it seemed like everyone in town over the age of twenty-one was packed into the bar right now, so it was likely I was here somewhere. His thoughts were both violent and desperate.

An icy calm washed over me, chasing away the burning fury and the sickening churn in my gut. My mortal eyes sharpened, and little details presented themselves to me as I assessed the whole scene. I'd already removed my bomber jacket and tied it around my waist, leaving only a crop top and sweatpants. My long blonde hair was loosely braided, with the ends tucked up under my rolled-up ski mask, creating an illusion of a plain black beanie overtop of a short chin-length bob. Moving smoothly, I glided through the crowd and lifted a glass of beer from in front of a dwarf couple while they were bickering, then turned away, bounced up and down in time with the music, and moved on to the dance floor, hiding in the pack of heaving bodies and keeping my knees bent and my head low so the crowd swallowed me completely.

The werewolf hadn't spotted me. From the middle of the sweaty throng, I noticed him look towards the door, and scowl. He was getting impatient. He thought of leaving, shifting into his wolf, and sniffing out my scent until he found where I was staying, and taking his time with me in my own home. His sneer turned into a smirk of anticipation.

I whirled in a circle and palmed my blade, singing along with the crowd to a stupidly upbeat pop song. I bounced left, then right, and faux stumbled out of the crowd until I was only two steps in front of the glowering werewolf. Facing away from him, I threw my hands in the air, sing-shouting the bridge of the song, shook my ass, then swung around in a wide arc, twirling dramatically in time with the music.

The beer in my glass went flying, spilling out onto the werewolf's boots. He snarled, ducked down to examine them. I twirled again, bellowing out the triumphant chorus to the pop song—

And slammed Stubby McStabby into his temple, right up to the hilt, splashing more beer to disguise all the blood splatter. I spun away again without hesitating, sinking back into the press of bodies.

The wolf spasmed; his legs kicked, body seizing.

Nobody paid him any attention. The crowd bellowed the chorus with me, arms flung in the air wildly. Another spin, and I feigned losing my balance again, laughing out loud as I stumbled and pushed the wolf's body right into the corner of the booth. Giggling uncontrollably and tripping over my feet, I pretended to use the wolf to regain my balance, got hold of my blade, pulled it out, and quickly slashed his carotid, just as insurance, and merrily flung my bomber jacket over his head, so he looked like he'd passed out in the corner. I spun back into the crowd, and sang the rest of the song, bouncing happily in between the waitress from the cafe and another young teacher from the high school.

The dead wolf lay still under my bomber jacket. A warm glow bloomed in my chest—nobody had noticed a thing. Still



feigning drunkenness, I stumbled off the dance floor and ran directly into the hard chest of a giant.

## CHAPTER 22



“That was smooth,” the giant said, his voice low and rumbling like a rockfall.

I unfroze, and backed away from him, feeling an urgent sense of terror thrill through me. Carefully, I isolated the feeling, examining it carefully while I ran my eyes over the enormous man.

I recognized him. Very short dark hair, a hard, square jaw, unforgiving lips and stormy gray eyes under a heavy brow. Last time I’d seen him, he was standing in the doorway with Mavri and Dashiell while I cowered on Malik’s castle wall. This was one of his brothers, another fractured god, a splinter of the Lover archetype.

We hadn’t met yet, and despite his formidable appearance, he felt less terrifying than Malik did. He must have been over seven feet tall, with wide shoulders that almost completely blocked out the flashing lights of the disco ball above us.

He exuded a faint feeling of bowel-watering terror. It wasn’t exactly unpleasant, though. It was more like an adrenaline rush so strong it made you freeze, like the thrill of facing a great white shark in the ocean.

I knew what he was. He was that overwhelming feeling that hits you when you realize you’d fallen in love, and you now had something to lose. The terror of new love.

A smaller man stood next to him, a dreamy smile on his face. I waved. “Hi, Dashiell.”

“Hey, Chloe. You haven’t met Lance yet, have you?”

“Nice to meet you, Lance,” I said politely.

“We’ve met before,” he rumbled, his hard lips curving down into a deep frown. “Cairo, thirteen years ago. I was getting an arms dealer out of the city. You snuck into the hangar, pretending to be the lost kid of a diplomat, then you blew up my charter plane.”

“Oh.” I remembered that job. The pilot of the plane had been in the witness protection program. A mafia don had paid Daddy a lot of money to find him and make sure he could never testify. They’d also had me track down and kill the pilot’s family, too. It was just another reason I heard screaming in my head when silence fell. Daddy was dead now, and so was the mob boss. He’d been quite high on my list.

I chuckled awkwardly. “Sorry about that. My bad.” I glanced up at Lance. “I didn’t know you were there.”

I was lying. At the time, I knew Hellix were engaged in an operation at that airport. Malik’s face, even when I was that young, was burned into my memory, so I’d been on the lookout for him, but he hadn’t been there at the time. I did remember seeing a huge man decked out in tactical gear along with a handful of other private security. I’d spoken to them, cried fake tears, and asked if they’d seen my father.

Dashiel nudged me, jerking his head towards the dead man in the corner, my bomber jacket covering his head. “I see you’re keeping your skillset sharp.”

“Oh. Yeah. He’s one of Braxton Myles’ wolves, here to torture and kill me,” I said, waving my hand absently. “Listen, is your boss here yet?”

Lance crossed his tree-trunk arms over his massive chest. “He is on his way. He asked us to make sure you didn’t leave before he gets here.”

That sounded vaguely threatening. I peered up at him. “I don’t remember... you know.” I waved my hand towards his body. “*Feeling* you, that day in Cairo. You keep your essence locked down pretty tight, don’t you?”

“We all do.” Lance’s voice was low, like a rumbling earthquake in the distance. “We all have to be careful; our essence can be overwhelming if we don’t keep it tightly contained.”

“Malik doesn’t,” I noted. “He is literally the walking personification of savage passion; it’s so overwhelming you can cut it with a knife.”

“That’s not him.” Dashiell gave me a knowing grin. “Maybe that’s just you.”

I stared at him for a long moment. “Stop fucking with me.”

“It’s true. Malik is more careful than any of us. Besides,” Dashiell said, shrugging. “Having both women and men driven wild, bending over and begging to be spanked and fucked while you’re trying to buy cookies at the Gulp-and-Go can get a little... y’know. Conspicuous. Malik has extraordinary self-control, better than any of us, because he has to. Mavri is a little different. He enjoys letting himself go from time to time.” Dashiell patted Lance’s shoulder. “But if the big guy here lets his guard down, people tend to have panic attacks and start to stampede like scared cattle. And, I’ll admit, I’ve caused the odd traffic accident in the past. We all know how to keep ourselves tightly bound.”

“Right.” An idea hit me. A good chunk of the adult population of Castlemaine was in this room right now, some of whom were on my Castlemaine Killer suspect list. I needed to spend some time watching their thoughts.

A vision of the little shack next to Ironclaw floated in front of my mind’s eye. There was something about it that felt really familiar, but I couldn’t put my finger on what it was. When I’d gone looking for Ironclaw’s new neighbors, I’d expected to find a magically protected compound filled with a blood witch coven, or a gleaming marble temple dedicated to some evil god, not a deserted run-down shack.

I felt like a vital clue was staring me right in the face, but I just couldn’t see it. “Do you think you could let loose a bit, Dashiell? I’ve got a mystery to solve, and it would be really

nice to have the crowd softened up a bit, so they're not on their guard."

He shrugged. "I don't see why not."

An emotion hit me—a dull fuzziness. I felt warm, giggly and stupid, but I isolated the feelings Dashiell provoked in me and squashed them down with a little effort.

"That's impressive," Dashiell nodded approvingly. "I've never seen such good self-control in a human before."

"Years of practice," I murmured, staring around the room. "If you'd ever defused a bomb while six feet deep in a K-hole, you'd understand."

Around me, people's eyes blinked heavier, and their cheeks flushed. One of the dwarves tried to take a sip out of a new glass of beer, and he tipped the whole thing in his lap. His partner started nuzzling into him like she was a cat, stroking her head on his shoulder, eyes half-closed.

I shot a glance behind me. Some of the dancers had started kissing passionately, their hands roving over each other's bodies. Thoughts morphed and bloomed lazily around me like flowers, showing me the crowd's wants, their desires, their loves.

I was surprised by how many people were thinking of pizza.

Suddenly, a thick fog filled my brain; blood rushed to my cheeks. The intense feeling of desire surged; I didn't want to squash it down. "This might have been a mistake," I murmured.

Dashiell chuckled. "It's not just me. Mavri just got here." He pointed at a beautiful man—the long-haired fractured god—as he strode into the room. "He will use any excuse to let his essence slip a bit. In between the two of us, Chloe, we'll get this crowd nicely softened for you."

A dull ache throbbed between my legs. I bit my lip hard to stop myself from falling down the rabbit hole of the sensation. "So, Malik's here?" I craned my neck, looking behind Mavri,

who had stopped at the bar to kiss a couple of pretty young witches.

Malik was nowhere in sight. He must not be far behind Mavri, who had gone with him on his mission to find and return their lost sibling.

Where was he? I *wanted* him. I bit my lip.

“Gah!” I shook myself and bit the inside of my cheek to shake off the lust that threatened to overwhelm me. *Come on, damn it, Chloe*, I silently begged myself. *Focus. Get your shit together.*

My self-abuse worked. I shook off the fuzzy feelings of dumb love and mindless desire, and I gazed around the room, studying people’s thoughts carefully.

The atmosphere thickened. The dancers moved slower now, entwined in each other, their minds on slippery skin and roving tongues. There—someone was thinking of handcuffs and gags. I watched for a moment, but it was just a kinky warlock. Twin thoughts bloomed next to each other, lustful and savage, a desire for a river of blood. My eyes found them in the darkness. It was just a couple of vampires, eyeing up Debbie the dance teacher, who was leaning precariously, almost spilling out of her leopard-print dress, waiting in line for a drink.

The new young bartender was leaning over the bar, French kissing a young human man, their tongues lapping at each other lazily. Both of them thought about having slow, leisurely sex, right here, right now. Nancy, scowling, threw a glass of water over them, huffed, turned on her heel and went to talk with Kelly, who was still watching the crowd with a grimace on her face.

They spoke quietly, their heads close together. Nancy’s thoughts showed her masturbating on a pile of money that Kelly had given her. Kelly, weirdly enough, was thinking of an older man who she worshiped with a reverence that took me by surprise a little.

Maybe Dashiel's influence had activated her daddy kink. The man looked a little familiar, probably a local warlock or something. Maybe he was the reason she'd moved to Castlemaine, even though she was fully human.

Mavri sauntered up to me, a sensual smolder on his face. "Hello, Chloe."

"Fuck off, Mavri," I replied, still staring at the crowd.

"Okay, then." He ambled off, and the atmosphere thickened again. I could feel the blood rushing in my core, pooling at the apex of my thighs. Every single movement I made, every breath I took, I felt my panties brush against my swollen clit. Grimacing, I readjusted my stance, standing with my legs open so I wouldn't accidentally stimulate myself too much.

Lance moved closer to me and bent down so he could speak quietly in my ear. "I will dispose of the dead wolf for you."

"Thanks," I muttered, still staring around the room, watching people's thoughts. I expected Lance to be discreet, but he just walked over to the dead wolf in the corner, tied my bomber jacket over his head to try to contain the blood, slung him effortlessly over his shoulder as if he were a gym bag, and marched towards two gaunt, green-tinged men standing in line at the bar.

Both the gaunt men's hollowed eyes glowed yellow when they spotted the dead man over Lance's shoulder. Their thoughts surged, delicious anticipation at devouring the dead flesh. My skin prickled. Is this the Castlemaine Killer?

Nope. They were just ghouls. One scuttled forward and reverently opened his arms. Lance dumped the dead body on the much-smaller ghoul, who embraced the dead wolf as if he were a lover. Carefully, scuttling sideways like crabs, the two green-tinged men left the bar, carrying the dead man between them.

Body disposal, Castlemaine-style. I'd have to find out where the ghouls lived.

Back to the drawing board. I blinked, tried not to breathe because it was making me horny, and focused on the room around me.

The atmosphere thickened. Mona and Susanna had been joined by a man with long silver-white hair, very pointed ears, and a smug expression on his face—a full high fae, I assumed. He sat between them, thinking of nothing but being pleased by both of them. I could see the sister's arms moving in a way that suggested they were fondling him under the table.

The fae man struck me as a little suspicious; his thoughts were tinged with defiance, as if he knew he wasn't supposed to be here, but he'd come anyway. I'd have to circle back to him and watch his thoughts a little more later. My eyes moved on.

The countess, too, had a new gentleman sitting next to her, a tall redheaded man with a full beard.

The lost Scottish explorer. He'd made his way back to town. Good for him. Hopefully, I could get him home at some point. I caught the countess's eye and mouthed, *Please don't eat him.*

She lifted one eyebrow. Her thoughts told me she *was* going to eat him. But first, he would eat her. Whether he'd still be alive at the end of it depended on how well the eating went.

I looked away, squirming a little. Goddamn. This gift was not working for me right now. All around me, the crowd was consumed with sex. Nobody was thinking of abducting their fellow supernatural creatures and torturing them for unspecified purposes.

I clamped my eyes shut for a second, blocking out the thoughts that surrounded me so I could recap all the clues. It would be easier if I knew *why* the victims were getting abducted and sliced up. If it was for a spell, I'd assume the perp would be someone with low levels of power—someone who wanted more.

Castlemaine had a lot of human residents; all of them could See. I could imagine it would be grating to live in a



town where most of the people were magical, and you were powerless and mundane. I swept the room again, checking out the thoughts of the handful of humans in the room, but they were all swept up in the horny atmosphere. Debbie was sandwiched in between a warlock and a vampire, both their hands roaming all over her curves. The high school teacher was necking with the girl from the saddlery.

The only humans in the room who weren't thinking of sex right now were Kelly and Nancy. They appeared to be having some sort of tense argument. Both of them were now thinking of splitting up and going their separate ways.

Wild hoots and catcalls near the dancefloor ripped my attention away. The dwarf couple had started having sex on the table in front of everyone. Three older witches twirled in the middle of the dancefloor, completely naked. Things had gotten a little out of control.

A hand gripped mine suddenly, and a feeling of desire ripped through me so violently my knees gave out. I stumbled, and the hand pulled me up and back. I careened into his hard chest and looked up.

“Woman,” Malik growled, glowering down at me. “What is this? Why have you instructed my brothers to incite an orgy in this bar?”

I stepped on my own toe, hoping the pain would help me focus better. It didn't. I felt breathless and confused just looking up into Malik's dark eyes. But, after a second, I remembered who I was and put my game face back on. “I'm trying to get some more clues. I asked your brothers to soften the crowd a little so I could read people's thoughts. I thought someone might be thinking of torture and murder.”

He studied my face. “Is it working?”

“No,” I grimaced. “They're all thinking of sex. Or pizza.” I peered around the room one more time, noticing that within the last thirty seconds, while I had been gazing stupidly into Malik's eyes, the place had cleared out a little. Mona and Susanna had disappeared with the high fae man, which was annoying. Debbie was already halfway out the door, trying to

walk up the few steps while still locked in a tight three-way kiss with both the vampire and the warlock.

The countess and the lost Scottish explorer had also taken their leave. Through the thinning crowd, I spotted Kaia's uncle, sitting on a high stool in the corner behind the bar, glaring at everyone. I wondered why I hadn't noticed him before.

He was annoyed. The new bar girl had disappeared with her lover, so he was one staff-member down. And Nancy, surprisingly, was now taking her time, flirting over the bar with Dashiell, who had gone to order a drink. Nancy batted her eyelashes and licked her black lips, her thoughts consumed with conquest. She wanted him more than she'd wanted anything in a long time.

Kelly was nowhere to be seen. Poor woman. Nancy was already on the rebound.

"I think my plan failed miserably," I sighed and glanced back up at Malik. "You wanted to talk to me?"

"I did." He hesitated for a moment. "Shall we go outside? The atmosphere here is not conducive for serious discussions."

"You can say that again."

He inclined his head towards the door. "Shall we go?"

"Sure." I didn't move. I couldn't. I was worried I might have an involuntary orgasm. My mind was calm and focused, but my body wasn't obeying my orders. My clit was too swollen, and my core pounded with need.

I took a deep breath and gave my vagina a stern lecture, which it happily ignored. *Give in, my body whispered to me. Submit. Kneel. Open your legs. Get on your hands and knees, arch your back, wait for him to move behind you...*

"Shut up," I said to myself through gritted teeth.

Malik glanced down at me again, brow furrowed.

"I mean," I said hastily, waving my hand forward, an invitation. "Go ahead. Clear the way for me."

Malik's face didn't give anything away—no knowing smirk, no leer—and a wave of gratitude swallowed the lust for a moment. He turned around and moved through the crowd, cutting a path for me to follow.

As soon as I was able to, I moved to follow him. I had to walk like a cowboy, legs akimbo, swinging my way up the stairs to reduce the chances of overstimulating myself.

Outside, I inhaled the cold night air as if I was drowning and felt the extreme lust drain a little.

Malik waited for me, keeping a respectable distance on the sidewalk outside. As my pulse returned to normal, my eyes drifted automatically to the apartment over the Flex Factory. The little nightlight was still on. Daphne was still safe.

“Did you find your sibling?” I asked Malik.

“Yes. They are home now, back in the embrace of the Wilds.”

“That's good.” A yawn cut me off. Damn, I was tired.

“Come,” he said, his voice low. “I will walk you home.”

“Fine by me.” I kept a few yards between us, just in case, but both Dashiell and Mavri's influence was gone now, so I could think much more clearly. Ignoring the throb in my core was harder, but I managed it. “You wanted to talk to me about something?”

“Yes. Come, let's go where there are no ears.”

We took the shortcut, walking down the alley on the other side of the bar, heading towards the lake. The night had turned chilly. Moisture hung in the air, settling on the billions of blades of grass spread out around the lake, turning it glittery in the soft light of the streetlamps. The water stretched out before us, silver and thick like mercury.

I shivered. I probably should have asked Lance to give my bomber jacket back before he handed over the wolf's corpse to the ghouls.

Malik saw me shiver and automatically moved closer.

I shifted away. “I’m fine.”

“I do not have a jacket to offer you.” He was still wearing his combat gear. He’d removed his tactical vest, which made it worse, because now I could see the way his cargo pants hugged his perfect ass. His tight black shirt molded to his shape like a second skin, highlighting every glorious muscle in his body. My eyes betrayed me, lingering on his arms. I had a thing for forearms, which I didn’t realize before. And hands. Huge hands, thick, dexterous fingers, skilled thumbs, limber wrists, sexy, muscular forearms...

Malik cleared his throat. “A werewolf came to the bar to kill you.”

“What?” I wrenched my eyes away from his wrists and shook my head to try to clear it. “Oh, yeah. It’s okay, I got him.”

“Yes. I ran into Paul and Gerald outside with the body.”

“Who?”

“The ghouls.”

“Oh. Right.”

Malik was quiet for a moment. His expression darkened. “I was under the impression the Alpha would not come for you.”

I squirmed a little. I’d made the same assumption. When Malik had stepped in front of me, blocking the wolf’s attack, he’d quite clearly sent the message to the wolves that I was under his protection.

“Yeah,” I replied wearily. “I thought the same thing. I assumed that Braxton Myles would regroup and find another way of getting back at me, maybe try and snatch me if I ever left Castlemaine. This wolf of his wasn’t following orders, though. He was trying to avoid being punished for something he’d done. He thought that by bringing my head back to Ironclaw, he’d win Braxton’s favor, and Braxton would have plausible deniability because he wasn’t the one who killed me.”

“Well.” Malik looked thoughtful. “He is now merely a nice snack for Paul and Gerald.”

“Good for them.” We walked in silence for a moment. The water of the lake rippled a little, sending eddies of silver water rolling over the surface. “You wanted to talk to me about something?”

“Yes. As I mentioned before, I believe I have located and returned most of my lost brothers and sisters from outside of this town. There are two still in this country, but they are public figures, so I will take them when we are closer to the deadline.”

“Really?” I peered up at him, curious. “Who are they?”

“One, you would know as a splinter of the Ruler. They are the ability to ignore everything else in pursuit of their goals. They are the blinkers of purpose. The blindness of ambition.”

“Oh. I gotcha.”

“The other one is my close sibling, another aspect of the Lover. This god is the feeling of being mesmerized. She is quite a famous singer, so I am reluctant to take her just yet.” His frown deepened. “Besides, her security is almost impenetrable. I have no desire to be arrested by the mortal police for attacking a celebrity with a dagger, not at this delicate stage of my mission.”

“Fair enough,” I said, burning with curiosity. “So, who is \_\_\_”

“There are a handful still missing,” he barreled on. “And I cannot locate them, but I can sense them a little, which means that they are close, and their mortal shells are strong. They are here, in this town, and they are healthy.”

“So, they’re not dead and on the astral plane, waiting to reincarnate?”

He shook his head. “The main witches’ coven here in town has a powerful medium among their members. When they are not warring with Countess Greenwood, they often barter their services with us. They are sure there are no more god-souls

lingering on the astral plane, waiting to reincarnate with the rest of the human souls. Pleonexy was the last.”

“That’s good, I guess. I’m not sure how I feel about you stabbing babies on the regular.” I stifled another yawn. “Why do they fight with Countess Greenwood?”

“They are white witches. The countess isn’t necessarily a dark witch; she’s something else, but they believe she gives the rest of the witches a bad name.”

I inhaled wearily, and it turned into a yawn. “Okay. So, the rest of your siblings are around Castlemaine somewhere.”

“Yes. I beg your assistance to locate them. The town has grown too large.”

“Well, we can’t have you going around kissing everyone on the lips on the off chance,” I muttered under my breath. “It would help if I knew what I was looking for,” I said, louder. “It was easy to find Pleonexy because she was spilling her essence everywhere; all I had to do was follow the greedy thoughts. And because she was a newborn, the only thing in her mind was her essential nature. Once people grow up, their thoughts grow far more complicated.”

“I can give you a list of the dozen or so siblings that are left. It is difficult to explain what they are, but I will attempt to quantify it in my report. We are missing two aspects of the Ruler, five of the Magician, and three more of the Hero. One is a splinter of the Mother archetype.”

“Not including you guys and Alaar?”

He shook his head. “No. We will leave once we return the rest.”

“Okay.”

He walked in silence for a moment. “And you will tell me what you would like in return.”

“What?”

“As payment for your services.”

I frowned. “Malik... you’re asking me to help save the world. I don’t think you need to pay me.”

“That is noble. However, I wish to give you something for your trouble.”

I chewed on my lip for a second, trying to derail my own train of thought. There was something I wanted from him, something I was obsessing over, but it wasn’t fair to ask.

He couldn’t help what he was doing to me. It felt weirdly unethical to ask him to fuck me into the next century then kill me with his bare hands.

Therapy. I needed therapy.

And maybe, after everything, I *didn’t* want him to kill me. “Can I ask you for your protection?” I asked, on impulse. “I don’t think Braxton Myles will be content to leave me alone. That wolf tonight had gone rogue, but I’m sure the Alpha is already thinking about ways to get back at me.”

A hint of a smile touched Malik’s lips. “Judging by the precise stab wounds on the werewolf’s body, you do not need my protection.”

I turned away. “You overestimate me.”

“I do not. Everyone else underestimates you.” His voice deepened. “Including yourself.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that, so I stayed silent. We reached my cottage and slowed to a standstill, lingering between the water of the lake and the gate to my backyard.

All was quiet and still. I took a deep breath and turned towards Malik. “I’d still like it if I could count on your protection.”

“It is already yours,” he murmured, staring down at me. A strange thrum pulsed through the air; Malik’s attention flickered. “I must go.” He morphed into shadow, bursting into a creature of darkness in front of my eyes.

I wasn’t sure if I imagined it, or not, but I was sure I felt a light touch brushing my cheek tenderly before he flew away.

## CHAPTER 23



It was lucky that I didn't bring the key for my back door. If I had, I would have missed the dead body in my front yard.

I stood in front of my white picket fence and stared at it. This one wasn't naked and covered in little cuts like the rest of the Castlemaine Killer's victims. He was wearing ripped jeans and a flannel shirt, both now dark red and soaked with blood. Everything else was unrecognizable; every single inch of him had been pummeled and smashed until his skin resembled freshly ground beef. His hair was short, though, and the jeans and shirt quite boxy and masculine, so it was safe to assume I was looking at another dead male werewolf.

He smelled disgusting.

A figure blinked into existence beside me. Sarah, wearing her usual bright-white gown, twirled one of her pigtails around her fingers. "It wasn't me. I swear."

I looked down at her. "Do you know what happened?"

She shook her head. "I was inside, watching T.V. I heard noises outside. Grunts and thuds. It happened a little while ago." She wrinkled her little nose. "I thought about moving him, but I thought you'd want to see."

"Hello, beloved neighbor!" Meadow stuck her head over the fence, her hair wild and tangled around her shoulders. "I'm so sorry, that was me," she said, nodding towards the dead guy. "His body flopped over the fence while I was driving him



out. I was reluctant to retrieve him without your permission.” She gave me her usual dreamy smile.

“Er. Okay. That was... you?”

“Yes.” Meadow blinked slowly, her face serene. “He was attempting to force his way into my house. I was worried for my children, so I removed him.”

I glanced down at the body again. His face looked like hamburger meat. “He was trying to break into your house?”

“Yes.” Her serene smile turned sheepish. “I may have gotten a little carried away with defending my nest. I was so worried for my children, of course. Sometimes I don’t know my own strength.”

“I’m not judging,” I said quietly, a little taken off guard. Meadow was not what I expected. My neighbor was a woo-woo, touchy-feely hippy with a brood of foster children. I never thought for a second that she could do something like this. She was a witch, though, so she probably knew some powerful defense spells. I made a mental note to warn Dwayne again about not eating any of her kids. Not that he would listen to me, but I could try.

I peered at the body a little closer. Maybe this was the Castlemaine Killer. Maybe he’d finally chosen the wrong victim. “Have you ever seen him before, Meadow?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t recognize him. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him before. He is not a local.”

“He’s a werewolf,” Sarah said, confirming my suspicions. “He’s probably from Ironclaw. Maybe he was looking for you, Chloe, and he got the wrong house.”

That was the most likely scenario. I hadn’t seen any inkling that the werewolf at the bar had a partner, but it was possible that this guy had come with him to find me.

They might have split up to search the town, to see who found me fastest. This guy might have tracked my scent and chose the wrong house. The other scenario was that he wasn’t one of Ironclaw’s wolves—he was the Castlemaine Killer, and

he was trying to abduct supernatural kids in the middle of the night.

He'd certainly chosen the wrong house, judging by the state of his body. I glanced up again at Meadow, standing in her yard wearing a pretty floral nightgown that buttoned up to her neck and flowed down to her ankles. "You don't have wards?"

"I only have alarms." She smiled back at me dreamily. "Most of my children have mixed blood, so I cannot have wards to bar any particular species from entering my house. The alarms do their job. I protect my children." Her eyes blazed with a righteous indignation for a second. "I will do *anything* to protect my children."

"Okay. Huh." I stared at her, thinking hard. The other less likely scenario was that Meadow was a terrifyingly powerful blood witch who was abducting the townsfolk and using their blood and bones to make herself impossibly, overwhelmingly physically powerful.

I could be living next to an insane psychopath who abducted people, murdered them for their power, and stole their kids so she could raise them herself. She had at least half a dozen in there, and I knew for a fact that none of them were biologically hers.

Maybe they were abducted. I made a mental note to search some social services databases to see if she came up as a registered foster carer.

"I'll come and retrieve him," Meadow said. "The ghouls will be happy for the extra meat."

They were certainly going to be well fed tonight. I let Meadow in my front gate, and watched her thoughts carefully while she heaved the huge dead wolf over her shoulder in a fireman's lift and threw him back over to her side of the fence. His body landed in her overgrown garden with a meaty thud.

"Thanks."

"You're most welcome, my beautiful neighbor." Meadow's thoughts were serene, just like her demeanor. The only thing

she thought of was her children—happy, smiling, and well-protected.

I couldn't really blame her for murdering an intruder. I stifled another sigh. It was more likely this werewolf was from Ironclaw, and he had come to murder me.

I thanked Meadow, and she disappeared inside her house. Wearily, I trudged inside mine.

## CHAPTER 24



I found Dwayne in the living room, staring at the remote control of the TV, which was twitching suspiciously on the coffee table.

He turned to me, mentally asking why the hell it was doing that.

“Sarah wants you to turn it on,” I explained. “She could do it herself, but she’s worried about touching stuff in here, in case she accidentally breaks something.” I hit the on button and flicked through the channels.

Sarah materialized on the sofa. “I promised I wouldn’t,” she whispered in her odd multi-tonal voice. “I swore to you that I wouldn’t break anything.”

“I won’t ever be mad if you do, Sarah,” I said to the poltergeist, as she settled into her seat and glued her eyes to the TV screen.

“I promised,” she said again, her voice fading. I watched her for a moment. As usual, something about Sarah made me want to punch walls and scream. I needed to find out more about her. There must be something I could do to help.

A strange sound cut through the air; like an electrical zap, coming from the lake. I jerked my head, startled. “What was that?”

Dwayne whipped his long neck around, staring beadily out the French doors. Alarm flared through his thoughts. Something was happening outside. He waddled forward quickly and kicked open the doors.

I scrambled after him. “Dwayne... wait!”

He did not wait. Frantically, his little feet making a *fap fap* sound on the stone pavers in the garden outside, he took off at a run, stretched out his wings and launched himself into the sky. I ran after him, heading towards the water.

The lake rippled; something big had disturbed the water around a quarter mile down from us, close to the shore. I focused through the darkness, trying to see what was happening. Dwayne flapped his mighty wings, soaring off into the night, his beautiful white feathers a beacon in the darkness. I narrowed my eyes, trying to focus on whatever he was flying towards, but it looked... fuzzy.

A cloud. It was a black cloud, hovering on the edge of the lake. Goddamnit.

I ran faster. An ear-splitting shriek tore through the air, the sound of a woman screaming in fear. I sprinted towards it; Dwayne, flying ahead of me, echoed it with a bloodcurdling hiss. He came in hot, flying directly towards the cloud. “Dwayne, no!” I screamed. “It’s not a cloud. It’s—”

He smashed into it. Metal groaned; the cloud listed, then fell back with a thud, and a shudder. The woman screamed again but I couldn’t see her; there was nothing around apart from the black cloud.

Desperately, I tried to focus. There—another fuzzy patch, a few feet into the water. The Castlemaine Killer was here.

I pushed myself harder, running around the lake, while Dwayne attacked the cloud, smashing his diamond-hard beak into it over and over, whipping his neck, tearing at it, backing up and rushing forward, charging with his shoulders. Invisible metal screeched and groaned as Dwayne bashed the cloud like a maniac.

“Not the cloud, Dwayne!” I sprinted, my eyes fixed on the fuzzy circle of air over the water instead of the cloud. The fuzzy patch suddenly moved, heading back to the shore, away from me. “Get that... that... that shimmer of air! The invisible thing, Dwayne! That’s the killer!”

He wasn't listening to me. He was too busy beating the cloud to death. As I ran towards him, he stuck his long neck underneath the cloud and flipped it upside down. It gave an ear-splitting groan, and a crash, glass shattering. He hopped on top of it and kept attacking.

The fuzzy patch was running fast now, heading away from me. I let out a groan; I'd never catch it, not now. My gaze shot back to the water, where it had been lingering, and I saw her. "Norma!"

The buxom tentacled woman was tangled in a net, writhing helplessly at the bottom of the lake.

Dwayne, hearing me, gave a panicked hiss, whipped around, and narrowed his eyes. He spotted her and took off, diving to the water. Working quickly, he slashed the dulling-net with his beak and razor-sharp claws, and finally, Norma was free.

She surfaced, bobbing in the water, sobbing pitifully, brushing her long red hair off her face. Dwayne fussed over her, tenderly patting her heaving shoulders with his wing, nibbling at her skin, grooming her as she cried hysterically for a moment. Some of the net had dug into her flesh, leaving vivid red crisscross marks on her white skin.

I cautiously edged towards her. "Norma... what happened?"

"I don't know!" she wailed dramatically, breast heaving. "I was just hanging out by the edge of the lake, and someone threw a net over me. I couldn't move! And worse, I couldn't *sing!*" She collapsed into Dwayne, who tucked a wing around her shoulders.

I mentally filed away the thought that Dwayne had a crush on an octopus-woman and watched Norma's thoughts carefully.

She was lying. In her mind's eye, she replayed what had happened. A faceless person with short brown hair had been sitting on the edge of the lake. Norma had felt out with her magic, checking to see if it was a local, trying to decide

whether or not she could have them as a snack. She'd decided to chance it and wiggled closer, when the person suddenly whipped around and threw a dulling net over her.

Norma had been on the shopping list. Guilt surged through me. I should have warned her.

Before I could ask anything else, there was a soft pop, like an atmospheric pressure change, and suddenly, there was a big black van sitting upside-down where the cloud had been a second before. The magic had dissipated; the illusion spell broken.

Norma let out another howl when she saw it. "A van? A black *van*? They were trying to abduct me!" Her voice grew outraged. "That's the getaway car. What kind of awful creature, what kind of vicious killer... oh, how dare they!" She burst into tears again, conveniently forgetting that she'd planned on eating the mysterious short-haired man first.

Cautiously, I moved towards the van, inspecting it carefully. Dwayne had really done a number on it. It was a luxury vehicle, a newer model, so whoever our killer was, they definitely had access to cash. Unfortunately, Dwayne had done so much damage, the doors wouldn't open. I peered through the smashed windows to see if I could spot any clues, but the front was very clean. No telltale notebooks, no grimoires, no checklist of evil deeds on a to-do list. There wasn't even a travel mug in the console.

The rear doors had been bashed in and refused to open, but I could see a thin sliver of the back through a crack. I dug out my phone and turned on the flashlight, peering inside.

My blood chilled. Inside the back of the van were chains and manacles, some fixed to a metal table in the back, some dangling from the roof. Some restraints glinted silver; others were duller, like raw iron. Salt ringed the floor.

They'd come prepared. Whoever was doing this, they knew how to restrain any supernatural creature.

My eyes lingered on something glinting at the back of the mangled van. My subconscious saw it before I fully registered

what it meant, and my heart froze in my chest.

Tiny handcuffs. Little child-sized silver handcuffs, perfect for a little werewolf girl. There was a smear of blood on the gleaming metal, still shining. It was fresh. The handcuffs had been used recently, so recently the blood hadn't dried yet.

The killer had taken a werewolf child tonight.

I backed away, heart pounding, and took off at a sprint, heading towards the Flex Factory.



## CHAPTER 25



I bolted through the town, and in less than a minute, I shoulder-charged the door of the Flex Factory. “Nathaniel!” Goddamn it, I should have brought my key. “Nathaniel!”

I shoved again, backed up, then kicked the lock. The door broke, cracking open. I sprinted into reception, turning left, taking the steps two at a time.

At the end of a short hallway, the door of Nathaniel’s apartment was wide open. I could see all the way inside.

Nathaniel lay in the middle of the living room in a pool of blood. His Snoopy themed pajamas were covered in blood.

“No!” I went to run inside, but I hit solid air, firm like metal. The ward held me back. I punched at it helplessly and screamed through the doorway. “Nathaniel! Wake up!”

He stirred, moaning, his eyes blinked open. “Chloe?”

Thank God, he was alive. “Nathaniel... Come on, boss. Get up. You can do it.”

Groaning, he struggled, and rolled over. A deep gash ran over his head, still oozing sluggishly. There was so much blood. Fear for him made me snap. “Suck it up, Nathaniel. If I can’t come in, you’ll have to come to me.”

His eyes rolled in their sockets. He flopped back down on the bloodstained rug and whimpered, “I... I can’t.”

Head injury. Someone had bashed him with something very heavy; Nathaniel was severely concussed. “Stay awake,”

I ordered. “Just stay awake, boss.” My gaze flickered around the room again. “Where’s Daphne?”

His eyes blinked open again; finally focusing on me. His lip trembled, “She’s gone.”

“Who took her?”

His face crumpled. “My mom.”

“Julie?”

“Yeah.” His voice shook with emotion and pain. “My mom just... She just walked in here. I’m so scared of her, Chloe.” His dark eyes filled with tears. “I was so scared, but I blocked the bedroom door so she couldn’t get in to take Daphne. She hit me. My mom hit me over and over and told me she was taking Daphne, and there wasn’t anything I could do about it because I’m just a weak, pathetic moron.” His voice grew thick; tears streamed down his cheeks. “I tried. I tried...”

It didn’t make sense. The little handcuffs in the Castlemaine Killer’s van... all my instincts told me that it was Daphne’s blood on those cuffs. “Julie took Daphne back to Ironclaw?”

Nathaniel let out a heartbreaking wail. “No. They sold her.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Alpha sold Daphne to someone else. My mom was just here to get her and hand her over to someone waiting outside.” Nathaniel’s big mouth twisted in anguish. “My own *mother* told me Daphne was going to be tortured to death because I was an idiot who stuck his nose where it didn’t belong.”

The tiny silver handcuffs flashed in my mind again.

The new neighbors. Braxton Myles had cut a deal with his “new neighbors” and offered up Daphne to kill two birds with one stone.

Molly was being punished for letting me escape Ironclaw. Nathaniel was being punished for harboring me. Braxton Myles was cementing some sort of sick partnership with his

powerful new neighbors. They'd already gotten Daphne and given her to the Castlemaine Killer, who had taken her back to their... abandoned shack?

It must have been a glamor. The little ramshackle building must be hiding something else.

I had to get Daphne back.

"Nathaniel..." He'd curled into the fetal position on the blood-soaked rug, crying pitifully. "Dude, look at me." Shaking with sobs, he slowly unfurled. "Crawl over here. I can't get past the wards, and you need help."

Slowly, with tears pouring down his cheeks, he edged towards the door frame, and stretched out a shaking hand. Once he was clear of the ward, I pulled him into the hallway and helped him get to his feet. We staggered down the steps, back to reception, where I laid him on the sofa and retrieved the first-aid kit from behind the reception desk.

I cleaned his head wound—working methodically, my movements practiced and automatic—while Nathaniel sobbed on the sofa. While I worked, my mind raced, running everything back in my head, all the clues, all the signs. *Think, Chloe. Think.*

A gust of wind blew my hair back; shadows enveloped me, gently brushing against my skin for a fraction of a second, chasing away the lingering fear, and then, Malik was standing next to me. He straightened up, huge and formidable, his aura pulsing with a savage anger barely contained by his enormous body. "We have a problem."

"Add it to the pile," I replied shortly, pointing at Nathaniel's vicious head wound. "The Castlemaine Killer has Daphne."

"The little wolf?"

I nodded. Malik held up his phone. A faint tinny voice floated out of it. "I think she's in here with me."

My mouth dropped open. "Dashiel?"

"Yeah, it's me. They've got me, too."

## CHAPTER 26



Dashiel kept talking. “I don’t know where I am, and I don’t know what happened.” His voice sounded very faint, breaking up a little over the phone line. I ground my teeth in frustration but didn’t interrupt. I needed to hear everything. “One minute, I was at the bar, doing shots with a couple of warlocks, and the next thing I know, I’m wrapped in a net and shoved into a van. I blacked out,” he explained. “I kept going in and out of unconsciousness, but it felt like we were driving fast down a really winding road.”

“Keep talking,” I said, carefully gluing the sides of Nathaniel’s head wound together. “Get to the part where you’re somehow calling us from the Castlemaine Killer’s lair.”

“Well, like I said, I passed out,” he went on, his voice dreamy as usual. “When I came to, I was on a metal table, with my arms and legs trapped in manacles. It’s a tiny little room, no windows or doors, made of concrete. It feels like a hospital. There were two men in the room, both wearing doctor’s clothes. Green scrubs, hats. When I woke up, I thought I was in hospital at first. But the doctors wouldn’t talk to me.”

I slapped a big piece of gauze over Nathaniel’s wound and started wrapping a bandage overtop of it to keep it in place. “And then what happened?”

“Well, there wasn’t much I *could* do. So... I just... let it all go,” he said. “I let my essence seep out of my body. One of the doctors is giggling in the corner, and the other accidentally stabbed himself with a scalpel. He’s bleeding to death. I might

have fried them a little bit,” he added sheepishly. “I didn’t mean to. Anyway, one of them let me out of my restraints so I got his phone to call you, but they’re not capable of telling me anything else. I’m still stuck here in this room.”

“You can’t get out?”

“The door is bolted shut. And a voice over the loudspeaker just told me that unless I get back on the table and sedate myself, they’re going to gas the room. There’s a timer ticking down in the corner. Apparently, I’ve got thirty minutes to make the decision.” His voice lowered. “I don’t know what they’ve done with the little wolf girl, Chloe, but I’m sure that she was in the van with me. I heard her crying. I’m sorry.”

I couldn’t bear it. The thought of that little girl getting sliced to pieces... My anger and frustration boiled over; I kicked the first-aid kit across the room and screamed. “Goddamnit!”

Nathaniel let out a pitiful wail and clutched his head.

“Sorry, boss,” I muttered. I turned back to the phone in Malik’s hands. “We’ll come for you,” I told Dashiell. “You and Daphne. Keep the line open; we’ll be there soon.”

“Roger!” Dashiell said cheerfully.

Malik lowered the phone, looming over me, his expression intense. “How will you find them? I have already done a sweep of the whole area and have found nothing. And they cannot have gone far.”

“The shack,” I muttered, chewing on my lip. “That’s it, I know it.”

“If you are referring to that run-down dwelling on the other side of the mountain next to Ironclaw, I have already been through it several times. It is abandoned.”

“It sure did look like it, didn’t it?” That was it. That was what had been bugging me.

The shack looked *deliberately* abandoned.

I turned around and let my eyes unfocus, bringing the image to the forefront of my mind. “I know it seems

impossible. It's not big enough to contain one large room to hold Dashiell in, let alone enough space to keep Daphne somewhere else." I ran over an image of the building in my mind's eye one more time, speaking my thoughts out loud. "The window in the front looked almost deliberately broken. Same with the door; it was hanging on one hinge. It all felt... deliberate."

My eyes picked out the inconsistencies in my memory. "The porch was made of splintered rotting wood, but the nails were gleaming. They were new, but the wood was old. And the corrugated iron panels on the roof—one of them was deliberately put upside down, so it was a different color from all the rest of them. Nobody would do that by accident. It was deliberate. And there was no plumbing, no toilet, no running water, no electricity, no generator." I was almost there... I was so close I could feel it.

It was familiar. The subterfuge, the pageantry.

There was a reason why a formidable Alpha like Braxton Myles was wary of his new neighbor, to the point of wanting to do favors and cut deals with them.

The shack was a cover. The Castlemaine Killer's lair was *underneath* it. Hidden underground.

That would take an enormous amount of resources, an insane amount of money—

My brain clicked all the pieces together, almost all at the same time. The black notebook, written in code. The surgical dissection of each of the bodies. The shopping list of supernatural creatures. The transit van, kitted out with high-tech restraints.

"It's not for a spell," I mumbled. "It's research. Experiments." My mind raced ahead of me, throwing up an image of my own weapons case. In a secret compartment where I kept my pharmaceuticals, I had a few vials of experimental substances that my handlers had bartered from Dominion, a black-ops military department. Dominion was headed by an absolutely despicable human called General Marsh. I'd never met him before, but I knew what he looked

like. My brain supplied several images of him, and suddenly, recognition punched me in the gut.

“Oh!”

I stood and paced back and forth. “I know who it is, and I know why they’re here. They stuck a base on the other side of the mountain in the same way researchers set up camp on the edge of a wildlife reserve. They sent their hunter into Castlemaine to capture whatever they needed.”

A deep growl escaped Malik’s chest. “The government.”

I nodded. “That’s it. That’s who is doing this.”

“I should have realized earlier.” His tone was ice cold. “Dominion?”

“Without a doubt. I know General Marsh just got a huge injection of funds in the last budget. This is what he’s using it for,” I said, letting out a bitter laugh. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it earlier.” General Marsh was famous for his “humans first” philosophy, which is where the codename Dominion came from. He believed in elevating humanity over everything else. Before I became aware of the supernatural world, I assumed that this was meant in relation to alien threats, or even things like disease mutations or fungus adaptations that might fry our brains and turn us to zombies.

I should have realized the truth. Dominion was set up specifically to make sure humans were more powerful than any other species on earth.

I looked up at Malik. “The shack is a front. General Marsh will have built an underground bunker. It will be fortified and well-guarded. And it won’t be directly underneath the shack either.” My memory supplied an image of the tire tracks I’d seen around the rickety building. They’d come in from the back. “There’s an underground entrance,” I said quietly. “At the back. That’s what they’re doing. Marsh has cut a pass through the Badlands and set up a military base right there, on the other side of the mountain. He’s been picking off the residents of Castlemaine one by one, torturing them and mutilating them, just to find out more about what kind of

magic they have and how best to kill them.” I remembered the vials of pixie dust in my kit, and the dead little creature on the road. “He’s got doctors experimenting on us, to see if there’s anything he can use,” I snarled.

“He will be taking his last breath very shortly,” Malik promised. “And he will not be working alone. A resident of this town would have to be helping him. Castlemaine would not admit an outsider with nefarious intentions towards the other townsfolk.” He met my gaze. “Someone has betrayed us.”

I looked up at him grimly. “I know who that is, too.”

“Come, woman.” He held out his hand. “It is time to go to work.”



## CHAPTER 27



Malik's armory was like nothing I'd ever seen before in my life. Rows and rows of high-tech weaponry—guns, bombs, knives, anything I could possibly want—it all stretched out before me. Malik, Lance, and Mavri were fully engaged, putting on holsters, slinging automatic rifles over their shoulders, snapping extra magazines into place, smearing camouflage grease on their cheeks. I shivered involuntarily watching them.

I'd already helped myself to his gear like a kid in a candy store. I wore black combat pants with ballistics inserts and kneepads, a skin-tight tactical shirt with experimental body armor that molded to my breasts, and light steel-cap boots. I discarded the ballistics helmet. If someone was going to shoot me in the head, it would be better for me if they hit me with a kill shot rather than take me prisoner with a nasty head wound. I was nothing if not practical.

We had already dropped Nathaniel off at my house. I settled him on the couch, politely asking Sarah and Jeb to watch him. Still very worried he would have a concussion, I asked them to keep him awake. Judging by the mortal terror in Nathaniel's eyes as he perched bolt-upright on the couch between the pretty little girl and a terrifying black hellhound, I knew there was little chance he was going to sleep anytime soon.

At least Nathaniel would be safe. Now, we were getting ready for battle.

The worst part was, I knew it wasn't going to be enough.

Military bases were the fucking worst things to infiltrate, I knew that for a fact. You'd be surprised how many high-ranking military officials had prices on their heads. I'd managed to sneak onto one base before, a long time ago, but failed more times than I succeeded. Military security was high tech, cutting edge, and the bases tended to lock down and even self-destruct if they were threatened. And if that happened, we would be digging out Daphne and Dashiell's corpses out of a tomb.

We wouldn't be able to bash our way in. And if we did get in, we wouldn't be getting out.

My brain whirred, thinking of all the possibilities. "Do you have any EMP bombs?"

Malik nodded towards a case in the corner, and I rummaged through it, grabbing a few things that might help.

A wave of despair rolled through me. "We're not going to be able to hit them with a frontal assault. They'll just kill everyone inside. I know how these places work, Malik. They'll lock down and pump poison gas into all the prisoner cells. They'll blow the whole base up. They'll sacrifice their own men and deny everything."

"Unfortunately, I know that you are right," he muttered darkly. "What do you suggest?"

"The obvious," I replied. "I need to sneak inside and disable the defense systems first, so you guys can storm the place."

"You cannot sneak in somewhere like that."

I shrugged. "I'll run a con. I know something that might work."

"A con? That is risky. You will be too exposed." Malik looked at me for a moment, his dark eyes stormy. "I am strangely reluctant to let you do this."

"I'm not asking." I ground my jaw and ignored the thrill of terror that sent a chill down my spine. "You know I'm right. It's not going to work any other way."

There was a long beat of silence. “Wo– Chloe.” He crossed his arms and glowered down on me. “I have been Hellix’s head of operations for almost sixty years. It has not just been a cover for finding my siblings. I am an expert in location and extraction.”

“Have you ever gone up against the US government? Ever tried to break into a secure facility?”

His jaw clenched. He didn’t reply.

“This is the only way, Malik. If we go for a frontal assault and try to bash our way through their perimeters, they’re going to kill Dashiell and Daphne, and whoever else they’ve got in there. If I’m right, and it is General Marsh doing this, then that means there will be a whole damn military base underneath that shack. We need to take down their defenses first, and then attack.”

The dark eyes studied me carefully for another minute. “Fine,” he muttered. “And how are you going to get in?”

“Leave that to me.”

## CHAPTER 28



Dwayne hopped up and down in the front seat, bristling with impatience.

“I’m going as fast as I can,” I told him. “Settle down. You know, it’s your fault we can’t speed right now. I’m not the idiot who tried to beat up a cloud.”

The van was doing surprisingly well, considering it was beaten so badly it looked like an old tin can on wheels. Dwayne had flipped it back onto its wheels for me, which, luckily, were re-inflatable. Now, hopping up and down impatiently on the passenger seat next to me, he jabbed his beak towards the road, urging me to go faster.

I sighed. “Why did I even bring you with me?”

He let out a bitter honk-laugh. He was here to avenge Norma, who was still crying at the bottom of the lake, her skin crisscrossed with deep scars from the dulling-net. Also, Dwayne’s thoughts told me, a little smugly, I needed him.

I did. He was my bait.

We drove over the west ridge of the mountain, heading down to Ironclaw. I found the turnoff and drove slowly down towards the shack.

There it was, a solitary, lonely little building in the middle of a dusty clearing. The rolling hills of the Badlands stretched out behind it. My pulse slowed. I drove deliberately around the building, back towards the beginning of the Badlands, and edged the van towards a gap between the hills.

The sentry might have been invisible, but no amount of camouflage gear would hide his thoughts from me. I saw the flicker of images as I approached the gap between the little hills. There were five men out here, hidden in the hills—two stationed in sniper positions on each side of the gap with their spotters and one at ground-level. I drove deliberately, heading towards the one on the ground.

I watched myself approach in his thoughts. A battered black van—one of theirs, recently reported abandoned mid-mission. The thoughts became guarded and suspicious as I rolled up next to him. I saw my face in his mind's eye, viewed through a sniper rifle, the crosshairs focused on the spot between my eyes. He could blow my head off at any second, and I'd never see it coming.

I swung the van around, and backed up until I was right beside the invisible checkpoint, rolled down the window, and stuck my head out, and prayed with all my might that my intelligence was still applicable. "Colonel Dianne Adler, here for General Marsh," I snapped. "Advise him immediately. I'll need full clearance. I must speak with him right now."

The invisible thoughts whirled. That was not what the sentry was expecting. I held my breath.

There was a long pause as he relayed the message. His thoughts, though, were fixed firmly on the spot between my eyebrows. One wrong word, one wrong move, and he'd blow my head off.

A tinny voice came out of nowhere. "Colonel Adler. You do not have clearance for this facility."

"Of course I don't," I snapped. "It's not my operation." I faced the invisible speaker directly, but kept my face in the shadows, hidden beneath my patrol cap. "And you can be damned sure I wouldn't run a shitshow like this," I added. "Do you know how easy you were to locate? This base sticks out like a sore thumb. You better arrange for clearance for me immediately," I said, with a hard edge to my voice. "If General Marsh is not here right now, then I'll need someone else to explain to me why our assets are being left scattered through

an enemy town for anyone to find. I'll need someone to explain to me why a billion dollars has been allocated to locate a list of alien creatures, yet they seem to be wandering the streets for anyone to find," I jerked my head towards Dwayne. "Why would you need a billion dollars when you can just lure your targets off the streets with a cold beer and a blueberry muffin? This little asshole won't leave me alone now, and I know for a fact he's one of your targets."

The invisible speaker blared static. The sentry kept his sights on me, but a distinct feeling of relief began to seep through his thoughts. He hated this place with its creepy creatures and disgusting half breeds. He couldn't wait to be reassigned.

The speaker clicked again. "General Marsh is on site but is engaged with the operations leader right now."

"Who is the operations leader? Is it Cooper?"

"Affirmative."

A surge of rage thrummed through me. They'd just confirmed who the Castlemaine Killer was. I let some of my anger seep into my tone. "That idiot Cooper couldn't organize a strike in a match factory," I snarled.

The voice grew sulky. "We had a team on the way to retrieve the vehicle."

"It's too late. If nobody is going to explain what the hell is going on, I'll have to schedule a meeting with Fletcher."

Tony Fletcher was the U.S Secretary of Defense. And Colonel Dianne Adler—the woman I was pretending to be right now—was one of his best friends, and the most feared figure in upper echelon military circles.

She was an accountant.

Colonel Adler headed up her own secret department within the military. Her primary function was making sure the government's precious defense budget wasn't being wasted, especially on things that might blow back on the government. Adler would often infiltrate military operations and secretly

audit them. She was the reason why some generals got their budgets slashed. Everyone hated her.

I knew everything there was to know about her. As a kid, I'd been contracted to kill her twice, but failed both times. I hadn't even managed to find out what she looked like. She was a master of disguise, so I didn't bother with one besides tucking my hair under a patrol cap and smudging some dark liner under my eyes to age me a little. Still, it was a risk to use her as a cover; I hadn't been able to find out if she was still active or not. Ten years was a long time in intelligence circles.

I let a heavy silence fall for a second, then leaned a little closer, staring directly into the scope of the sentry. "Do I need to turn this van around and drive back to Virginia?"

There was a soft beep somewhere deep in the earth. The van shook; the ground opened up in front of me, sinking downwards and creating a ramp underground.

I looked up and pointed to the sniper on the little hill above my head. His thoughts gave a start. Like the others, he thought he was completely invisible.

"Escort me to the security office, now," I snapped.

Obediently, he got to his feet, shook off his camo blanket, slid down the tiny dirt hill and started trotting towards the ramp that led down into the earth.

So far, so good. I put the van in gear and rolled it down into the earth, and it rumbled shut behind me.

## CHAPTER 29



The sniper jogged ahead of me, down a long drive heading deep underground into an enormous tunnel. Eventually, the fresh-sliced earth became ragged rock, and I finally realized how the hell Dominion had managed to carve a military base out of the earth with no one nearby noticing. This was an old mine—probably a relic of the California gold rush. The track through the Badlands had already been there. General Marsh had just cleared it out, carved a driveway into the earth, and set up his base underground, like the fucking troll he was.

I maneuvered the beat-up van down the driveway as best I could. We came to a large cavern—a storage area with boxes piled up on pallets lining the walls, four big, armored personnel carriers, a handful of ATV bikes parked in straight lines, and huge crates of what I assumed were weapons stacked in the middle. A few soldiers in fatigues lingered in the cavern, tinkering with the vehicles or marching around with clipboards, doing inventory.

My sniper guide stopped, turned to face me, and pointed towards the row of APCs parked along one side of the enormous dark space, indicating I should leave the van there. I maneuvered the van into a small space, parked, got out, and stalked towards him with my chin held high. Infiltration was all about confidence.

Dwayne hopped out of the truck too, and waddled beside me, pursing his beak-lips as he took in the enormity of the secret military base. The sniper's professional demeanor



wobbled slightly when he saw my beautiful feathery friend waddling alongside me.

I snapped my fingers at him. “Security, now.”

The sniper hesitated. “I will need to escort your prisoner to one of the holding cells first, ma’am. Contamination protocols are in effect. It must be secured.”

“You will do no such thing.”

“Ma’am, these creatures aren’t just supernatural, they carry diseases. Colonel Cooper has insisted on full restraints for any target we apprehend. We don’t want to unleash any disgusting magical avian flu.” He lifted his rifle and pointed it at Dwayne. “The Colonel put this goose on the target list for a reason. He’s a monster.”

“It’s a goose, corporal,” I said in a bored tone. “They are generally regarded as vicious bastards.”

He hesitated again. “Well, she’s gonna cut it up anyway, we might as well get it in restraints now.”

Dwayne’s eyes narrowed dangerously. Murderous thoughts bloomed in his aura.

I stared at the sniper as if he was an idiot. “We are underground, corporal. Any lethal threat can be neutralized without any effort.” I arched one eyebrow and gave him an icy stare. “General Marsh has spent forty million dollars on this base alone, just to apprehend a handful of creatures that could be easily lured by a handful of corn. Now, leave the cute fluffy goose alone and take me to security. *Now.*”

He hesitated for one more moment. “This way, ma’am.” He turned and walked towards a thick metal door, punching in a code on the keypad outside. It buzzed loudly and opened.

We marched down a long concrete corridor, passing several other checkpoints. Soldiers walking towards us plastered themselves against the walls as we passed, some disappearing into what looked like mess halls and dormitories. We passed through another checkpoint and came out in a larger hallway, reminiscent of a concrete bunker, a dozen unmarked doors on the way.

I could hear voices behind those doors. Quiet, desperate sobbing. Blood-curdling screams. Bursts of static. Voices snapping at each other, barking orders. I strained my ears to catch what they were saying, but the voices were too faint.

My stomach churned. Daphne and Dashiell were in there somewhere.

The sniper led me to the end of the corridor to another unmarked door. He knocked brusquely, opened it, and saluted whoever was inside. “Colonel Adler, sir.”

A gruff voice beckoned me inside. “Please come in, Colonel.”

I stalked through the door, willing my eyes to adjust quickly to the gloom. The space was filled from top to bottom with security screens. A handful of soldiers sat in a row in the back, watching the screens intently, their faces bleached pale by the cool light of the monitors.

A strange loud gurgling noise in the hallway caused me to pause and backtrack for a second. I stuck my head through the door again, realizing that Dwayne hadn’t followed me inside.

There he was. His clawed webbed feet clutched the sniper’s tactical vest, and he was currently shoving his diamond-hard beak into our escort’s throat. While the sniper grappled with his weapon, caught off-guard, Dwayne ripped out his windpipe, flung it around in the air like a lasso, and let go. The sniper collapsed, blood pooling on the ground.

I rolled my eyes and mouthed at Dwayne. *Dude, come on.*

He gave a goosy shrug, bent his long neck down again and pecked at the sniper’s eyeball. I suppressed a shudder, put my game-face back on, and marched back into the security room.

“I’m going to need the operations brief and a full rundown on expenditure so far,” I ordered, my tone brusque, my eyes taking in every single detail in the room down to the ranks of each person here.

One major—the head of security and four warrant officers. Visible side weapons holstered. The major was in his late fifties, bald, heavy around the middle, and the four warrant

officers were practically identical—skinny, pale young men. Two wore glasses. While the major sat in the main terminal, monitoring the general security outside and within the base on the main screen above him, his underlings sat in a row behind him, eyes glued to their assigned monitors. I paced back and forth for a moment, finally catching sight of what they were watching.

All of them were watching people being tortured.

The monitors were displaying video feeds from the holding cells. I caught an image of a restrained vampire getting his feet burned off by a UV lamp, swallowed heavily, and looked away. “Give me everything you’ve got, Major,” I ordered.

“I can’t do that just yet, ma’am. The information is classified,” the major said, deliberately not making eye contact with me. He knew that the appearance of Colonel Dianne Adler meant an operational nightmare was about to go down, so he was choosing his words carefully. “I apologize, but General Marsh and Colonel Cooper are in a meeting right now. Once they’re out, they will be able to provide full clearance, and I can tell you everything you need to know.”

“I don’t have time for this, Major,” I growled. Dwayne finally waddled into the room; disappearing into a corner to groom the blood off his feathers.

“I apologize, Colonel. We’ll get you clearance as soon as possible.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, narrowing my eyes and studying their security software. It was a Maytech system—complicated, with unnecessary features, and not much in the way of a failsafe. It was designed so only a handful of people could access the backend. Apart from Marsh and Cooper, the major here was the only one with clearance to make changes to the locking systems.

I eyed him out of the corner of my eye while I tapped my toe impatiently. There it was, a little key on a chain around his neck. All I had to do was punch it into the outlet, plug his code

into the keypad, and I would be able to unlock doors without alarms being set off.

I turned to the row of nerds at the computers behind me. “Leave us,” I ordered. “I would like a word with your commander.”

Suspicion flared in the major’s thoughts. “No.” He held up his hand abruptly. “They can’t leave, Colonel. They are doing the remote monitoring of the subjects. That data is why we’re here in the first place.” His gaze turned beady, and he turned and focused on my face for the first time.

Shock flared in his mind, and a vision of myself appeared in his thoughts—too young and far too pretty to be the infamous Colonel Dianne Alder.

The jig was up.

“Stop right there!” The major went for his gun, scrambling to draw. I shot forward, plucked his lanyard from around his neck and plugged two rounds in his chest before he could even release his own weapon from his holster. The shots were deafening in the tiny space, but that couldn’t be helped.

Dwayne spread his glorious wings and launched himself into the air behind me. He made short work of the nerds watching the torture on their screens—terrified screams and gurgling cries provided the soundtrack to their slaughter.

Soon, the room was quiet. I waited a beat to see if anyone had tripped an alarm I’d missed, then, satisfied there were no security alerts, I studied the control panel, inserted the Colonel’s key, and tapped a button, opening the ramp entrance to the base outside. “Ghost Barbie to Dracula One, the egg is cracked open. Enter at will. Watch for the snipers and the sentry outside,” I added.

Malik’s deep voice thrummed in my earpiece. “That is not my callsign.”

I was too tense to smile. “It is now,” I said, anxiously moving to the row of monitors behind me, checking the screens.

Short cracks and a muffled shout drifted over my earpiece. I studied the monitors in front of me, found the one covering the entrance, and watched as a nightmarish shadow-winged beast swarmed the snipers outside, blood spraying in an arc over the rocky ground.

“My call sign has always been Ares,” Malik added.

“It doesn’t suit you,” I said. “It’s not bloodsuckery enough.”

A truck approached the entrance—Lance and Mavri. I watched as the shadow beast’s form coalesced into Malik’s glorious man shape, stalking down the driveway into the earth in front of the truck.

Gunfire popped. Malik dissolved, exploding back into shadow. Formless, a malevolent cloud of black smoke, he whirled down into the depths of the cavern, taking out the soldiers as he went.

I moved back to the little monitors behind me and studied them carefully, looking for Daphne and Dashiell.

Horrors assailed me, screaming vampires, witches covered head-to-toe with blood, tiny winged fairies writhing in agony, and there was Dashiell, lounging on a metal examination table, playing Tetris on his phone while a man in scrubs rolled around on the floor next to his dead coworker, laughing hysterically. My eyes landed on a screen on the far left, and my heart stopped.

Daphne.

A man wearing a lab coat had her pinned on a table. He was cutting into her, making little incisions in her flesh, holding a stopwatch and watching the skin knit back together. Daphne was alive, awake, and screaming in agony and fear.

“No!” Frantically, I looked for the location on the monitor but couldn’t find it. The rooms should be numbered. There were at least two dozen doors off the main corridor. “Dwayne!” I screamed. “Leave one alive! I need someone to \_\_\_”

He let out a sheepish muffled honk and jumped up on the desk, holding a severed head in his beak. The nerd still had his glasses on.

“Damn it, Dwayne!” I spun to look; every one of the warrant officers was lying on the ground, headless. “What the hell?”

Dwayne shrugged, whipped the severed head around in a circle and let it go. It hit the main screen with a dull thud, leaving a thick red smear on the glass.

I let out a wail of panic. “Did you have to behead them *all*? Why do you have to be so goddamn *extra*?”

An image appeared in his thoughts—a vision of him trying to hold a gun in his wing and failing horribly. He hadn’t worked out how to do it yet, so he was just going with his strengths.

Frantically, I turned back to the control panel, searching for the locking mechanism. I found it, and switched the system to override, unlocking all the doors in the base.

“Package is unwrapped,” I said into my earpiece, my voice strained with tension. “Your brother is in one of the rooms just beyond the mess hall.”

“Copy.”

My eyes lingered on the screen where Daphne still lay strapped to the table. Her little body was covered with little slices, dripping with blood. Her torturer—an elderly man with a comb-over, wearing a lab coat—hesitated and glanced up at the camera for a second.

He’d heard the locks click. He barked an order to the scrub-wearing assistant, put his scalpel down on the tray, tore off his rubber gloves, then stalked towards the door, hitting a big red button on the way out.

My monitor flashed. *Clean and dispose*. The clock showed two minutes, counting down.

Shit. “No. No no no...” I searched the control panel desperately. There—cleaning protocols. I tapped the keyboard,

bringing up the specs. I knew they had gas, probably more than one type. Most military facilities used knock-out gas so they could subdue their subject and carry on the interrogation or experimentation later.

Adrenaline and sick fear surged through me when I saw what they were using. Colonel Cooper had loaded their gas canisters with thanosysis, a combination of mustard gas and iliomeanadrine.

Thanosysis reduced any organic matter into liquid form on contact. They were literally going to pump the world's most corrosive gas into that tiny room, melt Daphne alive, and hose her liquified body off the torture table. Dashiell, too. His clock was counting down. How many other people had they done this to?

Two minutes. There were too many soldiers out there. I needed a clear path to the holding cells.

It was time to empty this nest. I turned the master key, smacked a big red button activating the evacuation protocol, whipped around, and bolted out of the room.

## CHAPTER 30



Alarms blared. Shouts and screams echoed down the hallway towards me, muted with a little distance as Malik and his brothers slaughtered everyone in the cavernous entrance. The bright fluorescent lights above me blinked out, clicked, then came on again in a bloody red glow.

Three soldiers sprinted out of a side room; one spotted me. “Hey!” He marched towards me, thoughts fixed on helping me, a pretty soldier, exit the base. Suddenly he jerked, eyes flaring as he spotted Dwayne waddling next to me, his beady black eyes shining a hellish red in the glow of the emergency lights. “It’s the hostile!” He scrambled for his weapon.

Dwayne rushed him. I spun out of the way, executing a perfect pirouette, leaving Dwayne to take out the leader. I ducked under the grasping hand of the soldier next to him as he attempted to grab hold of me, swept the feet out from under the third one, dropping him like a rock, and slammed my blade into his chest. Dwayne disposed of the first guy, then whipped his long neck around into the second one, driving that deadly beak into flesh like a dagger. Their bodies twitched at our feet.

Easy. Just like riding a bike.

Ninety seconds. I yanked the first door open. Empty. The room opposite held the vampire I’d seen getting his feet burned. His eyes were wide and glassy, his skin starting to flake. He was already dead.

The third held what looked like a half-breed of some sort, a short woman with a halo of yolk-colored curls. She was



strapped to the table, eyes squeezed shut, panting softly.

There was no time to free her. “Dwayne, cut her loose!” He flew into the room, and I was already gone, checking the next one. Sixty seconds.

I flung the next door open. A troll grunted at me from a cage in the corner, enormous gray shoulders hunched over, his eyes streaming in his potato-shaped head. I backed out immediately, making a mental note to let him out of that cage last. Trolls were unfathomably destructive. If I let him loose now, he’d lumber around and break anything he could get his hands on. I needed this base intact while I found Daphne.

I ducked into the next room, which was empty. Another alarm blared; the lights above me changed from blood-red to a dim blue glow.

Forty seconds. Five more soldiers bolted down the corridor, shouting urgently to each other.

My earpiece buzzed. “Dashiel is secured.” Malik’s voice was curt. “We have another problem.”

I kicked open the next door and gestured for Dwayne to come and let the tiny winged creature inside free. He flew into the room, and I bolted to the next one.

“What’s the problem?” More soldiers appeared in the corridor, their faces stony, their thoughts panicked. They ignored me and sprinted towards the exit.

“This place is going to be a tomb in about sixty seconds,” Dashiel’s voice floated into my earpiece. “The two guys who worked me over were talking about it, Chloe. The sloping entrance is designed to collapse under a hundred tons of hard rock. There’s no getting out of here after that.”

A rush of bodies surged down the corridor, some soldiers in various states of undress. They all ignored me. Now, it was every person for themselves. Mortal terror whirled through their thoughts as they sprinted for the exit, their worst fears coming to life—being buried alive, slowly suffocating to death in a cloud of dust.

A familiar gleam of box-dyed black hair in the middle of the mob caught my eye, and a surge of rage rushed through me.

No. Daphne first. Revenge would come later. “Help me find Daphne!” I barked at Dwayne as he waddled towards me.

The little pixie he’d freed was perched on his back, holding on to his neck. Her wings hung in tatters, completely shredded. She scrambled up his long neck and whispered in his ear. She knew where the girl was.

Dwayne narrowed his eyes and flew forward, heading towards the end of the corridor. He kicked the door open and let out a honk. I rushed after him, following the crowd of frantic soldiers as they bolted down the hall.

I could kill two birds with one stone. I reached out and grabbed the black box dye by the hair, yanking her hard towards me.

“Ouch! What the— Hey!” Nancy’s eyes popped. “Chloe? Chloe, what are you—”

I roughly pinned her arm behind her and marched her forward into the room where Dwayne stood, shoving her into a corner. “Watch her,” I told him.

The alarm screeched. Ten seconds until cleaning protocol commenced.

Daphne. There she was, strapped to the table, her little body covered in lacerations. One side of her beautiful dark hair had been shaved; they’d tattooed a number into the side of her skull. My stomach lurched. They’d amputated all the toes off her left foot.

She turned her head and looked at me. “Chloe?”

My lungs were too tight; I couldn’t draw a breath. I’d promised I would protect her. I told her nobody would hurt her. I fucking *lied*.

My heart felt like it was being ripped out of my chest.

Quickly, I used the keypad at the door to trigger the safety override. The countdown clock froze. Two seconds. I let out a

soft breath.

Then, I turned and fixed Nancy with a hard stare. “Where’s your girlfriend, Nancy? Where’s the lovely Kelly Cooper?” My mouth twisted in disgust, as much for me as it was for her. I should have picked up the clues earlier. I could have saved Daphne all this pain.

Nancy’s eyes were wide; she was shaking in fright. “I don’t know! She forced me to come here,” she wailed. “I didn’t know this place existed. Kelly picked me up from the bar, and she put a black hood over my head, and she—”

“Don’t lie,” I snarled. Reaching out, I grabbed her roughly and threw her against the table; she yelped pitifully. “Don’t lie to me, Nancy. Where is Kelly Cooper?”

“I don’t know!” she screamed, cowering against the table.

My earpiece buzzed. “Chloe. Woman, get out now.”

I ignored Malik and gently unlocked Daphne’s restraints. “You did this.”

Nancy reared back, horrified. “No! I would never—”

“You did,” I spat out through clenched teeth. “Look at her,” I said, indicating the bloody child on the table in front of me, now eerily still and calm, staring at Nancy. “Look what they did to her. This is your fault.”

“Chloe, I never—”

“Don’t *lie!*” I took a deep breath; my voice grew soft, and icily calm. “Kelly Cooper approached you outside of Castlemaine and made you a deal. Get her inside, provide intel on the creatures of the town, and use your pathetically dismal powers to help her kidnap the ones she wanted. She brought them here and had her butchers cut them up.”

“I didn’t know! Chloe, you have to believe me! I’m a prisoner, just like you!”

“She gave you lots of money, didn’t she? Huge stacks of cash,” I said, remembering how Nancy always saw her girlfriend as a source of money and nothing else. Too late, I

realized that there had never been anything romantic in her thoughts. Just greed.

And in the same way, I remembered how Kelly saw Nancy as an asset—something she was proud to have procured. I swore loudly, cursing myself for not putting it all together sooner. The strong soul contract that the countess had sensed; that was Kelly Cooper, fanatically devoted to Dominion, the entity she served above all else. I'd even seen General Marsh in Kelly's thoughts. He was the older gray-haired man she was thinking of at the bar earlier.

And Nancy and Kelly hadn't broken up. They were just *splitting* up. Kelly left first, plucked Daphne out of her grandmother's arms and brought her here, to the base, then returned to try to grab Norma, while Nancy drugged Dashiell, and probably that dead vampire from the other room as well. I was sure he'd been in the bar tonight.

"You had a busy night." I stared at her bone-white face, her quivering black-lipsticked mouth, and shook my head slowly. "You're not even gay, are you?"

Her mouth trembled. "Chloe—"

"And she gave you blood to use for your spells, didn't she? You've been doing blood magic to fix glamours on military vehicles and turn invisible."

Nancy's chest heaved. "I—I—"

A low rumble sounded in the distance. The steel table shuddered. Nancy gave a moan of terror, staring at the overhead lights, watching them swinging wildly in the earthquake.

Malik shouted in my earpiece. "Chloe!"

It was too late, and I couldn't bring myself to care; I was too angry. I'd been buried alive before, a couple of times, in fact. I'd been through such horrific things in my life. And all I wanted was to make sure no other little girl ever had to go through what I went through.

And I failed. I couldn't undo what they'd done to Daphne.

My eyes flickered towards her, Daphne sat perched on the end of the steel table, her arms wrapped around her knees, watching me with her enormous dark eyes. One of the butchers had left a lab coat slung over a chair; I picked it up and draped it around Daphne's shoulders. Malik shouted in my earpiece again; I ignored everything, and fixed Nancy with a hard stare. "Tell me where Kelly is."

Nancy's expression changed; her heavy jaw hardened. "Or what?" She let out a hysterical, bitter laugh. "What are you going to do? You know what that earthquake was, don't you? We're all fucked now, bitch."

"Where is she?"

"You have no idea what it's like," Nancy snarled, madness flaring in her eyes. "Being the black sheep of a coven. Being the outcast. Being the weakest link. You don't know how hard it was for me, growing up in a magical town as the least-magical creature in it. The rest of the coven sell potions and charms, and I have to work in a bar, just to make ends meet!"

"Oh no," I deadpanned. "How awful. To not have much magic in a town that has a population of forty percent humans, who *also* don't have magic."

"It's not the same!" Nancy's voice rose to a scream. "I was born as a witch, and my coven hated me! They only value power, and I barely had any. It wasn't my fault! It was *never* my fault! My mom was ashamed of me. My grandmother never even looked at me!"

I kept eye contact with her, noticing sparks flaring around her fingers. Nancy had been doing a lot of blood magic; she was far more powerful than she had ever been before, and she loved it.

Almost idly, I watched her thoughts as she ranted, distracting me while she surreptitiously weaved a spell that would turn my brain to liquid inside my skull. Nancy had it all figured out. If she could murder me in a horrible, painful way, and harness the resulting energy release, she might be able to create a spell that could somehow get her out of this giant tomb.

The brain-liquifying spell required her to draw runes in the air with her fingers; she was trying to complete it before I noticed what she was doing. “You have no idea what it’s like,” she seethed. “To have people look down on you. To be cast aside like you were nothing!”

The spell was almost finished. Relief surged through her thoughts. I stepped forward, grabbed one of her hands, and broke her wrist with a quick pop, then snapped her elbow, dislocating one, then the other.

She screamed in agony, her arms hanging uselessly at her sides. “What... what the fuck? What did you do to me!?”

I stayed close to her, staring into her eyes. “Oh, you were babbling, Nancy. You need to focus now. Where is Kelly Cooper?”

Nancy’s thoughts scattered in panic; suddenly, she realized I wasn’t what she thought I was—a do-gooder, a random blonde bitch trying to save her little werewolf friend. She cowered against the table, and I loomed over her.

“Tell me where Kelly is,” I said, my face expressionless.

“She’s offsite!” Nancy screamed. “She just left to get on a flight to the capital.”

“Why?”

“General Marsh has redirected most senior staff to a new operation there,” she babbled. “They’re gone. That’s why Kelly wanted to do a big grab tonight, so she could leave them with enough bodies to run their tests on while she was away.”

“The capital? Do you mean D.C.?”

“Yes!”

A tingle of fear ran through me. “Why has she gone to Washington D.C.?”

Nancy spluttered, leaning away from me. An image of Colonel Kelly Cooper, in full dress uniform, flared in her thoughts, barking orders at her to watch the other targets and see if she could drug them unconscious, like she’d done with Dashiell.

Nancy wasn't going to say that part out loud, though. "She's gone to lead an operation to take down some stupid skeleton bitch and her werewolf boyfriend."

I was jolted out of my icy-cold calm. Prue? Was she talking about Prue? I backed away from Nancy, caught off guard. There was only one animated skeleton on this continent, as far as I knew, and that was my best friend. "What is she going to do?"

"Take them down," Nancy moaned pathetically. "Kelly has enough data now to know how to handle pretty much all supernatural creatures. It's for a cause, Chloe. You're human, you should understand. She just wants to make sure we're not overrun by the fae scum, or the vamps and shifters. We have to come out on top. Humanity first." She dissolved into hysterical sobbing, crouching down on the floor.

I barely heard her. I had to get to D.C. I had to help Prue.

A dark shadow flew into the room; Malik stalked towards me, huge chest expanding as he took a deep breath. "You're here." Relief turned his dark eyes molten.

"Yes." I looked up at him. "Where are the others?"

"Outside." He glared back at me. "Where you should be. Dashiell has sustained light injuries, and Lance was shot twelve times. Mavri has taken them back to the castle so they can heal."

"Why didn't you leave?"

He didn't answer. He just stared at me.

I cleared my throat awkwardly. "I need to get to Washington D.C."

Malik cocked an eyebrow. "Chloe. We are buried under fifty feet of rock."

"Yes, I know," I said testily. "I'm sure it's nothing you can't handle."

"You may be overestimating my abilities."

I shrugged. "You overestimate mine all the time."

“My shadow-form can only move through air. There is too much compacted dirt on top of us, and I cannot find any cracks or crevices to get through.”

Daphne leaned forward and tugged on my shirt. “Chloe...”

I blinked down at her. “Hey, sweetheart. Don’t worry, we’re gonna get out of here, I promise.”

“I know. That’s not what I was going to ask.”

“Well... what is it?”

She held up a combat knife; it looked enormous in her little hand. “Can I have the traitor?”

“I’m sorry... What?”

Daphne jerked her head towards Nancy, sobbing and crouched on the ground, almost cowering under the table, her arms dangling uselessly by her sides. “I would like to deliver justice,” Daphne said formally, in her high-pitched little girl voice.

“Honey... where did you get that—” I patted myself down. Oh, it was mine. Daphne had lifted my knife out of its sheath without me noticing.

I plucked the knife from her hand, pursed my lips, and looked down at her again. The sweet little sociopath blinked up at me innocently. “Please? I’ll make it quick. I promise.” Her lip trembled.

“Oh, honey.” I shook my head, while I watched her thoughts.

Strangely, her reasons made sense. She didn’t want to kill Nancy for a sick thrill. Daphne thought that killing the person who did this to her would take away the horror she was feeling right now. She was neck-deep in trauma and slowly drowning. And because of her questionable education so far, she fully believed that if she killed Nancy, she could make some of that pain go away. She hoped that vengeance would save her.

Her thoughts made me want to howl in misery. It all hit too close to home.



I knew that vengeance wouldn't save me. I knew that *now*. Killing monsters wasn't the thing that would wash my hands clean of all the blood I'd spilled. The only thing that would save my soul was helping other people.

And I'd only just learned that recently. I was two decades older than Daphne, but only one step ahead of her.

"Listen, honey." I cleared my throat and bent down so I was at eye level. "I know that settling a blood debt is a common concept in Ironclaw. And I know you learnt the whole eye-for-an-eye thing in the Children of the Passion. But take it from me, vengeance doesn't make you feel better, Daphne. Killing the evil people who hurt you won't ever take away the pain that they caused—"

I saw myself reflected in her eyes and cut myself off abruptly. I heard the lies in my ears. Daphne was born into the flames, just like I had been.

"You know what," I tossed her the knife. "Go crazy. Make it quick, though." I turned around and walked out of the room and shut the door firmly behind me.

## CHAPTER 31



Malik followed me out. “I have never had children of my own. I do not interact with them much. Is it normal for them to demand satisfaction of a blood debt? Is it a maternal instinct to let them bathe in the blood of their enemies?”

“I don’t know,” I said sarcastically. “Is it normal to stab babies in the chest with silver daggers?”

“They were not human children; they were awakened gods. For the last time, woman, they do not count.”

I blew out a breath. “I don’t know, Malik. Daphne’s already a killer. Her mother made her fight in two dominance battles when they got back to Ironclaw. She was just snatched out of her bed, taken to a secret military base, strapped to a bed, and tortured. I’m not about to write a book on parenting or anything, but if someone had handed me a knife and told me to go ahead and stab the monster under my bed when I was a kid, I think I’d be a much more well-adjusted person now.”

Malik pondered it for a moment, then shrugged. “I suppose that is fair.”

“I couldn’t protect her.” Tears welled up in my eyes; I dashed them away, but more came. “Now, at least, she will know she can protect herself.”

Malik was suddenly closer, then I was wrapped in his arms. The feeling of him, of his body, his raw essence, it burned everything away in an instant—all the festering wounds of my past, the fresh horrors of the present, the

gnawing anxiety in the back of my mind that we were stuck in this rocky tomb forever, slowly suffocating to death. Tension melted out of my limbs. I had no strength left, but I didn't care. I felt Malik's huge hands around my shoulders, pulling me in, drawing me close, his cool breath on my neck. I shivered, while my mind whirled like a tornado.

Him, giving me comfort? This was the man I'd been scared of my whole life, terrified he'd pop up and rip out my spine for taking out a body he was guarding. This was the man who'd haunted my dreams. Whenever his face drifted into my thoughts, my knees went weak, and I broke out in a sweat. This was the fractured god, the embodiment of savage passion, the original vampire. And he was holding me, stroking my back with his huge, warm hand, and murmuring endearments in a strange tongue.

I wanted time to stop completely. I'd never felt safe in the arms of a man, in the arms of *any* man. None of them had ever protected me. Yet, wrapped in this huge, solid figure of overwhelmingly masculinity, I felt like I never had to be scared of anything ever again.

A peeved-sounding honk brought me back to earth. I disengaged, drawing away from Malik with difficulty. Both because he was resisting letting me go, and because I couldn't think of anything I wanted more than staying in his arms.

I glanced up at his face as I withdrew. Safe. My safe place.

I'd never felt safe before. Never.

A sharp pain suddenly spiked me in my ass. "Dwayne!" I rounded on him. "Goddamn it, dude! Don't peck me on the ass, it hurts!"

He sneered at me, dirty thoughts running through his head. Then, after calling me a slut in a few imaginative ways, he turned serious. He'd done a quick reconnaissance with the injured pixie who was still riding on his back.

"Yes, I know, we're stuck here."

Malik's earpiece blared. "My brothers are on their way with an excavator. The air in here will not last that long,

though,” he said grimly. “We will be dead before they can dig us out of the rubble.”

“It’s okay,” I said, thinking furiously. “I’ve got an idea.”

## CHAPTER 32



“*W*hat do you say, sweetie?” I beamed down at Daphne. “It’s a good plan, right?”

She nodded slowly. “I guess...” She held up my KaBar. “I get to keep this, though, right?”

I grinned. “Sure, you can. And don’t worry—he won’t catch you. Malik will whip you away if he gets too close.”

She grinned back at me; the trust in her eyes felt like a knife to the heart. I didn’t deserve it.

Malik paced behind us, his expression thunderous. “This is a terrible plan. It is times like this I am glad I cannot reproduce.”

“Don’t be a downer, Malik,” I nudged him. “This is going to work just fine. And anyway, beggars can’t be choosers.” My smile felt strained. It was already starting to get difficult to breathe. As soon as I realized the facility’s extractor fans had continued to pump air out of the base, while none was coming in, I put together the dumbest plan I’d ever thought up in my life.

There were no other options, though. We needed to get out of here quickly.

“Let’s do this,” I said. “Places, everyone.”

Malik sighed and dissolved into shadow. He flew down the corridor and shot into a side room. In two shallow breaths, he was back. “It’s done. The carrot is in place.”

I nodded. “Excellent. Daphne, you’re up.”

“Okay.” Without hesitation, she trotted towards the doorway that Malik had just come out of, stopped, turned slowly to look inside, and took a deep, dramatic gasp.

A bone-chilling groan shook the concrete walls. He was awake. He’d spotted her.

Daphne was a fantastic actress. Her huge eyes grew impossibly bigger, and she let out an ear-splitting shriek of fear.

Huh. Maybe she wasn’t acting. The troll was actually pretty terrifying.

Inside the room, the clang of metal indicated the troll had tested his cage door and found it unlocked. Heavy footsteps lumbered towards us. God, I hope this worked, or suffocating to death might be the more pleasant option.

Since I woke up and found out about the supernatural world, I’d devoured as much information as I could. The hardest part was telling fact from fiction, but luckily for me, I had some insider information from my many years as Sweet Dumb Chloe.

Just last year, I’d tagged along with my best friends Prue and Sandy on a bachelorette party. The bride herself had told me a hilarious story about fighting a troll and had thrown in a few important tidbits of information. Sweet Dumb Chloe thought the bride had a wonderful imagination. Ice-Cold Killer Chloe filed everything away, just in case.

Now, I knew a lot about trolls, and I knew there was nothing a troll loved more than eating children. Their eyesight was poor, but their sense of smell was excellent, and once they were awake, the only thing that would put them back to sleep again was a blow from their own fist.

They were also excellent tunnellers and could clear rocks aside easily with their natural affinity to earth. Therein lay the foundations of my entire plan. Unfortunately, trolls were also as dumb as the rocks they were made of, and this giant lug wasn’t about to help us tunnel out of here. I’d come up with a solution, and Daphne was my bait.

Okay, it wasn't a great plan, but it was the best I could come up with.

The troll's footsteps thudded closer. Daphne turned on her heel and ran towards us, screaming at the top of her lungs.

"Positions," I hissed, edging back into the cavernous entrance.

Malik had done a full assessment of our options and found that the collapsed tunnel was the worst possible exit—the troll would have to dig through half a mile of rock and hard packed dirt to get out that way. Instead, we piled all the crates and pallets up into a ramp, leading up into the top corner of the entrance. If the troll managed to dig a hole straight up, it would only be around a fifty-foot dig. Easy, for a troll. We just had to give him the motivation. A delicious little girl.

God, I hoped this worked.

I threw myself up the makeshift ramp, picking up the desert camo blanket I'd plucked out of the pile of supplies a few minutes ago.

Daphne came screaming down the hallway, deliberately staggering and stumbling so she wouldn't get too far ahead. Damn, that girl was brave. The troll thumped behind her, roaring in fury, his face covered by a blood-soaked lab coat. He stormed into the cavern, and with one huge meaty hand, he wiped the lab coat off his face and flung it away.

His huge nostrils flared. He could smell Daphne everywhere now; that was the lab coat I'd draped over her when I freed her from the table, and it was covered in her blood. Malik had drifted into the troll's holding cell, unlocked the door of his cage, then suspended the coat above the door so the troll would run into it while he was chasing the tasty child that had just appeared in the doorway. Her scent was now on his nose and rubbed all over his face.

Daphne, seeing that the troll had lost track of exactly where she was, let out another terrified shriek, and darted deliberately forward. The troll spotted her, roared and thumped forward, his enormous belly almost scraping on the ground

between his bowed legs. Daphne started climbing up the makeshift ramp and headed towards me.

I waited, holding my breath. We had to time this just right...

The troll climbed after her, huffing and groaning. Hot breath blasted from his gaping maw—huge, like a hippo's mouth, with enormous flat teeth made for grinding bones. The ramp trembled under his weight. He staggered sideways, peering ahead with beady eyes, trying to catch sight of the delicious child only a few yards in front of him.

She was almost there. Daphne glanced up, spotting me right beside the hard packed dirt at the top of the ramp—our intended exit. Her gaze was so trusting, not a trace of fear in it at all. I nodded at her encouragingly, while praying that this makeshift ramp wasn't going to collapse under us, flinging us to our deaths.

The troll roared and reached out, swiping at Daphne with a huge hand. I flinched, but she pulled her leg out of the way in the nick of time and scrambled a few feet ahead. Almost there. Almost there.

The troll's hot breath was putrid. He pulled himself up the final few feet. Daphne was stuck now, sandwiched against the wall, rubbing herself into it, the troll reached out to grab at her....

I flung out my arms, wrapped the camo blanket around her, and embraced her, shifting her one foot over just in time. The troll's spade-like hand dug into the side of the wall, slicing through the rock and hard-packed dirt effortlessly. He hesitated and sniffed deeply, his huge nostrils flared dramatically, and he inhaled the smell of the child, still right in front of him. He scooped another shovel of dirt away, then another. The scent was right there. Just in front of him. He kept digging, not realizing that her scent was on his nose. He threw great shovels of earth backwards, covering our makeshift ramp.

Within a few moments, the troll was deep in the tunnel, heading towards the surface. Malik ghosted in, appearing



beside us. He reached out and steadied us with his hands, peering into the tunnel. “He is moving fast,” he noted.

“He’s starving,” I explained. “I couldn’t understand a lot of what was going on in his thoughts, but I know he was hungry. He’d forgotten what the outside looked like.”

“They were starving him.”

“Well, technically you can’t starve a troll, because if they don’t eat, they just hibernate. But Marsh’s butchers were preventing him from hibernating.” A rumble sounded through the cavern, and an enormous chunk of rock barreled towards us from the tunnel. I held onto Daphne tighter until the shaking subsided. “I get the feeling he was here when General Marsh took over. He might have been their first prisoner. When he gets out of here, he’s going to go and eat as many kids as he possibly can.”

Malik frowned. “Hmm. I think we have damaged enough children for one day.” He put his hand on his earpiece, and quickly ordered his brothers to subdue the massive creature when he emerged.

The cavern shook again; a section at the far end suddenly collapsed, an enormous rockfall crushing the row of ATVs. I glanced up, meeting Malik’s eyes. “I don’t think we’re going to be able to sneak out after him.”

“We have to follow him now,” he agreed, his face stony. The cavern was collapsing.

“Dwayne!” I screamed. “Where are you?” Trust that bastard to disappear, right when we were about to escape. There he was. His head popped up from down below, several assault rifles slung over his mighty neck. The little shredded-wing pixie was still on his back. She held a tiny gun in both hands like it was an AR and bared her teeth.

“We’ve got to go!” I screamed.

More of the roof collapsed; huge shovels of dirt still spilled out of the tunnel where the troll was frantically digging. The sporadic rumbling increased, growing louder and louder. The ramp beneath our feet suddenly pitched and

collapsed. Dwayne launched himself into the air, hurtling towards us just as Malik dissolved into shadow, wrapping me and Daphne in a tight embrace, and hurtled through the suffocating earth.

“Dwayne!”

“He—he is here.” Malik’s voice was strained. “Behind... us...” He swore roughly, morphed again, and suddenly, Dwayne and the pixie were wrapped up with us, squashed in between me and Daphne. My shadow beast monster pulled us slowly, painfully, out of the earth.

I heard the troll roar over the deafening rumble of collapsing earth. It wasn’t enough, we weren’t going fast enough, the dirt was pulling at us, sucking us back down. Malik, in his shadow form, was fighting through it, pulling us through the broken rock.

His strength was waning. It was too loud. Too rough. Too suffocating.

We tumbled into the open air. Dwayne, Daphne and I spilled out of the darkness of Malik’s shadow, heaving fresh oxygen into our lungs. In the distance, the troll roared.

The ground shook wildly underneath our feet. The hole was collapsing. Malik slung Daphne over his shoulder and grabbed my hand. “Run!”

The ground crumbled beneath us, chasing us as the cavern collapsed beneath our feet. I pushed harder, sprinting, with Malik holding Daphne next to me and Dwayne flying through the dust by my side. We ran like the devil himself was chasing us.

Finally, *finally*, the ground grew solid beneath our feet, and the trembling eased. We’d outrun the landslide. Dust hung in the air, turning the night foggy. Malik gently set Daphne down and slumped on one knee. I collapsed next to him, still panting, heaving in great lungfuls of air, incapable of speech.

After a long moment, he looked up and caught my eye. “Woman,” he growled. “That was the *worst* plan.”

I coughed. It hurt. Everything hurt. “It worked, didn’t it? We’re alive.”

“Barely. You seem to have an affinity for lingering at the edge of death. You are a magnet for monsters, and you enjoy a brawl. I’m surprised you didn’t invite the troll to dinner.”

## EPILOGUE



*T*wo weeks later

I RAN through my list one more time in my head. My list, as usual, was my whole world. Had I gotten everything?

I wasn't sure. I'd only just returned to Castlemaine this morning, and my head still buzzed. As usual, I hadn't had time to stop and take a breath.

I'd missed something. "Parmesan," I groaned out loud. It was too late now; I wasn't going back to the store. I'd have to send one of the kids back to grab some for me.

I sighed, and kept walking home, blisteringly aware that I desperately needed some downtime. Now that I was back and things had settled a little, I could use a break. Some self-improvement courses, maybe. Therapy, definitely. After everything that had happened in the last two weeks, I probably needed it more than ever.

I'd been *busy*. Once the Dominion military base collapsed, I begged Malik to fly me back to Washington D.C, desperate to find Kelly Cooper before she hurt my best friend, Prue.

Things worked out better than I could have ever dreamed. Not only did I manage to save Prue—not once, but twice—and kill Kelly Cooper, I also tracked down General Marsh and put a bullet in his head, putting an end to Dominion once and for all. And, finally, I was forced to face my greatest fear.

The fear that no one would love me for who I truly was.

I'd been terrified that my best friend would reject me, or even hate the real me—the cold-blooded killer, the calculating assassin who killed on command, never questioning her handlers.

But Prue confirmed something that I desperately hoped was true. Sweet Dumb Chloe, the girl everyone loved... She *was* me. She was a huge part of my personality. I still hadn't quite figured it all out, but at least I'd stopped crying all the time.

It was good to be home. The sun was setting now, dipping below the west peak of the mountain, so I picked up the pace, hurrying back to my cottage. I still had a lot to get done. Tonight, Malik Malleus was coming to settle the debt I owed him. I was cooking him dinner.

I turned the corner, and my footsteps faltered. Sarah stood outside the cottage on the sidewalk, her little fists clenched. She saw me and exhaled, a strange preternatural multi-tonal sound. "There you are."

A tingle surged through me. "Are you okay, honey?"

Her chin trembled; then, she blinked in and out of existence. The pavement beneath me trembled.

Oh, shit. Something had upset her. "Sarah... It's okay. Whatever happened, I'm here now."

She blinked back into her little-girl shape. Her dress was brighter white than usual, she was having trouble holding on to her form. "I hate this," she whispered. "It's so hard."

"What's hard, honey? Talk to me."

She extended her hand and gestured behind her. A dead body lay in my front yard.

Oh, God. Not again.

I cautiously edged closer and looked. It was a man, a grown man, middle-aged, with a stocky body covered in deep slashes. His throat had been sliced open, his eyes glassy. No flare of color shone in his eyes, but since he was wearing the

typical beat-up-jeans-and-flannel-shirt uniform, I could safely assume it was a werewolf.

“Damn. I thought Braxton Myles had given up.”

It was the third werewolf he’d sent to get me. The first two had come while I was in D.C, and Dwayne had added their bones to his sculpture in the backyard.

Sarah blinked in and out of existence again. I looked up and met her huge dark eyes. “It’s okay, honey. Don’t worry about it. It’s called self-defense.”

“No, that’s not it,” she whispered. “I’m not sad he’s dead; I’m angry because I couldn’t stop him. It wasn’t me who killed him. I promised you I wouldn’t break anything in your house, so I waited outside until it was over.”

“Oh.” I was confused. It must have been Dwayne who killed the werewolf intruder. Or Jeb, who had invited himself around for dinner. Or even Nathaniel, who had brought Daphne around for a playdate with Sarah. When Nathaniel found out I was making lasagna, he also decided to stay.

Daphne. My pulse quickened. “Can you start from the start? What happened?”

“Jeb and Dwayne got into a fight over who was going to pick the music for the playlist tonight. I made them take the fight outside so they wouldn’t break anything. They were brawling down by the lake when the werewolf came.”

Shit. My heart thumped. “They left Daphne and Nathaniel inside, alone?”

“Yeah.”

I dropped my groceries, ready to bolt inside, but the front door opened, and Daphne poked her head out. “They’re on the way.” She spotted me. “Oh, hi, Chloe.”

I rushed forward and knelt down next to her, examining her carefully. “Are you okay, honey?”

“I’m fine. I was just calling the ghouls to come pick up the body.” She gave me an angelic smile. “Uncle Nate is a little shook, but he’ll be fine.”

I turned to look at the dead werewolf again and pressed my lips together. He was covered in deep cuts that could only have come from a combat knife. “You took care of it, huh?”

“Uh huh.” Daphne turned to Sarah. “Do you want to come and skip stones on the lake with me?”

Sarah beamed. “Sure.” She blinked out of existence. Daphne giggled, and ran back inside, scampering out the French doors through the kitchen, heading towards the lake.

For the millionth time, I regretted my decision to let Daphne kill the traitor, Nancy. Somehow I’d given her the go-ahead to murder anyone who threatened her. So far, everyone had deserved it, and she’d never given any indication that she was a total psychopath, but I was still deeply unsettled by it.

Everything about Daphne hit too close to home. I sighed, gathered my groceries, and walked inside.

Nathaniel sat on the sofa, sobbing into his hands, while Jeb patted him on the back.

“You okay, boss?” I asked him.

“I... I.... I...” He sobbed and let out a wet sniff. “I’ll be fine.”

Dwayne stood on the coffee table watching them, his lip curled. He thought Nathaniel was pathetic. I pointed at him. “You were supposed to be guarding them!”

He shook himself, bristling his beautiful feathers. He was pissed, too. He’d missed the action. He’d been showing off at the lake, hoping Norma was watching, and having a delightfully fun fist fight with Jeb in his hellhound form. Once Nathaniel started screaming, both of them rushed inside to find Daphne covered in blood, stabbing the werewolf with the knife. Dwayne was annoyed he’d missed it.

Jeb patted Nathaniel’s heaving shoulders and glanced up at me. At least he had the grace to look ashamed. “Sorry, Chloe. We got carried away. I guess the werewolves are still coming after you, huh.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I’m not sure what to do about that.”

Outside, the sun dipped below the horizon, and darkness fell like a curtain at the end of the play. Abruptly, the tension drained out of me, and a smile pulled at my lips.

Malik Malleus, the Vampire Lord, was on his way.

Moving towards the windows, I glanced out and watched him—a terrifying black winged beast made of shadows, flying from the castle on the mountain on his mighty wings. He dipped low over the lake and soared over my house, disappearing. Two seconds later, my doorbell rang.

I jabbed a finger at Dwayne and Jeb. “Set the table,” I ordered. “Get the lasagna out of the oven. And for God’s sake, you lot better behave yourself.” Smoothing down my hair and making sure my jeans and blouse were neat and tidy, I rushed down the hallway and opened the door.

Malik Malleus stood on my doorstep, an enormous presence blocking out all the light behind him. He held a bottle of wine in his hands. Red, of course.

I stared at him, almost incapable of speech. It had been two weeks since I’d seen him last, and somehow, he’d gotten overwhelmingly more beautiful. Maybe it was the clothes he had on. I’d become used to seeing him in ballistics vests, combat pants, and heavy boots, but tonight he wore black jeans and a simple gray t-shirt. His tousled hair, for once, was pulled back, scraped up in a topknot, highlighting his carved jaw and high cheekbones. I couldn’t rip my focus away from his eyes, deep, dark and molten like lava.

He inclined his head in greeting. “Did you know there is a dead man in your front yard?”

I suppressed a grimace. “I did. The ghouls should be on their way. It’s a werewolf, which is the first piece of bad news I’ve got for you tonight.”

“Oh. That is... unfortunate.”

“That’s an understatement. The second piece of bad news is that it was Daphne who took out the werewolf.”

He frowned. “Why is that bad?”



“She’s a child, Malik! She should be doing gymnastics and learning to hold a pencil, not doing martial arts and holding combat knives.”

“I do not see the problem. She took out an enemy combatant.” He glanced away, his jaw suddenly tense. “Although Braxton Myles is a complication we do not need right now. Clearly, we need to do something about Ironclaw, but that will have to wait.” He met my eye, his expression softening, and held up a little flash drive. “I am afraid that I also have bad news. We have an urgent situation to deal with, and I need your assistance. You need to be briefed immediately.”

I groaned. “Can it wait until after dinner?”

“What are we having?”

“Lasagna.”

The ghost of a smile brushed over his lips. “In that case, yes, it will wait. Although, you will need to study the brief while we eat.”

I sighed and took the wine bottle out of his hands. “Then we’re definitely going to need this.”

We walked down the hallway into the living room. Dwayne had set the table and dimmed the lights; candles flickered in a candelabra. Jeb carefully put the huge, steaming dish of lasagna in the middle of the table, his eyes flaring hellhound-red in the candlelight. Sarah and Daphne sat together at one end of the table, giggling.

Malik hesitated in the doorway. “Could you find any other dangerous creatures to join us for dinner?”

“Well,” I said, plucking the hard drive out of his hand. “Actually, yes. Countess Greenwood was going to come, but she had to take her new boyfriend back to Edinburgh.”

“A magnet for monsters,” Malik muttered. He walked into the kitchen, and, with a graceful confidence, retrieved the wine glasses from the top cabinet and poured the wine.

Nathaniel walked over from the sofa, still wiping his eyes. "I'm the only one who's not dangerous," he said in a little voice. His chin trembled. "I'm pathetic."

Daphne growled. "No, you're not, Uncle Nate!"

"I am." His bottom lip wobbled. "My mom was right. I'm useless."

"On the contrary," Malik said, handing him a glass of wine. "I require your assistance, Nathaniel. You lived in Ironclaw for sixteen years; you have a unique perspective and intelligence on pack life, their strengths and weaknesses. Since the Alpha will not refrain from attacking Chloe, and I am unable to enter Ironclaw territory, I would ask that you work with me so that we may find a solution."

"What?" Nathaniel's cheeks glowed. "Really? You need me?"

"Of course. Who else would be able to provide such accurate intelligence on our target?"

I stifled my chuckle and opened my laptop, plugging in the hard drive Malik had given me. "You guys go ahead and eat," I said. "Let me get this out of the way, then I'll join you."

The others dug into the lasagna, but Malik settled himself on a bar stool next to me at the counter. "I regret rushing you," he murmured. "Unfortunately, the situation is urgent."

"Then you should have given me the files decoded already," I said wryly. "Give me the bullet points while my encryption software does its thing, would you?"

He moved to face me, and suddenly, I became blisteringly aware that my legs were sandwiched between his.

"The first thing is that one of the Lightbringers came through the nexus three days ago to speak with me." His tone became grave. "The Wilds have grown far more unstable. They are concerned that our world is deteriorating too quickly. They have shortened my deadline. We only have three months to find the rest of my siblings."

I glanced up at him. “Three months?” He nodded. “That’s not ideal, but you already know where the rest of your brothers and sisters are, don’t you?”

“There are only a handful of unawakened gods left, and most of them are here, in Castlemaine.”

“And two others,” I said, remembering what he’d told me before. “The ones who are public figures. The famous singer, right? Who is she?”

“I am not concerned for her right now. It is the other one, the splinter of the Ruler, that is the urgent problem.”

“Why?”

“This morning, a contract was put on her life,” he explained. “A powerful political rival has apparently become frustrated with her and decided to remove her in the most permanent way possible. If she is killed before we can awaken her, then she will move into the human cycle of reincarnation. We will not get her back before the Lightbringers come.” Malik moved closer, lowering his voice. “All will be lost.”

“Oh. That *is* bad news.”

My laptop pinged, and the file opened. I ran my eyes over it quickly. It was a contract, and a dossier on the target. “You took the contract to kill her.”

“Of course,” he said. His eyes met mine. “It buys us some time. We must go and find her now, awaken her, and send her home before anyone else decides to pick up the contract.”

“Okay.” I sighed, clicking away from the contract and opening the dossier on the target. “You don’t really need me, though. You already know who she is.”

“Yes, but she has become aware of the threat and has gone underground. I wish to use your sneaky expertise to locate her and draw her out of hiding.”

“My sneaky expertise,” I said, sniggering. I clicked on another tab in the dossier, and the laugh died in my throat.

No.

No, it can't be.

There, on the screen, was a photo of the target. The fractured god—the essence of blind ambition.

It was my mother.

*To be continued...*

**RAVENOUS BEASTS** — book three in *The Waif In The Wilds* — will be released 14 January 2024.

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If there was something you hated, or you spotted a typo, please email me at [info@laurettahignett.com](mailto:info@laurettahignett.com) and let me know. I'm human, unfortunately, and so is my editor, but we do our best to get everything right.

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